ANDY, YOU'RE A STAR

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For the lovers, the dreamers, and me.

May queer voices be heard and queer stories be told.

And queer joy prevail.

CHAPTER ONE

Friday night is Open Mic Night at Ace's Tavern. Then again, so is Tuesday. One, obviously, more well-attended than the other. Fridays buzz with anticipation for the weekend – riddled with an older crowd, spilled beer, and poor choices. Tuesdays, on the other hand, buzz with the same kind of enthusiasm as a vibrator whose batteries haven't been changed in far too long. It's there, and it's trying – but it doesn't give quite the same kind of effect to someone looking for excitement.

On this Tuesday, the Tavern filled with college students looking for cheap drinks and 25 cent wings. Behind a beat-up old microphone someone definitely rescued from a high school basement, stood a young man with violently copper hair and an acoustic guitar in his hands. His voice sounded the way you'd imagine your favorite bourbon to sound – if that bourbon also had some salt ground into its vocal cords. Smooth and sexy, but occasionally full of that grit that scratches your ear holes just right.

Andy McLayne was, by far, the most popular act during open mic night, although that didn't mean too much in the grand scheme of things. He was still very much a small fish in a big pond, but it satiated his need to perform for the time being, and the Tavern quickly became his second home.

As Andy serenaded the quiet crowd, a bartender hummed along under his breath, his eyes fixated on the boy with the guitar, rather than the same patch of bar he'd been scrubbing for far too long. An older woman approached him, her own dishrag tucked into the pocket of her skirt, crossing her arms as she looked between the two of them.

"You know, I think you've got it…" she commented, quirking an eyebrow.

His head shot upward and he turned a little, confused. "Huh? What?"

Ro Parrish shook her head, chuckling a little to herself. "You've been cleaning that same spot for like ten minutes, dude."

The other bartender, Doni Delaney, looked down at the rag in his hand and blushed, adamantly scrubbing the already sparkling bar harder. "There's something…*sticky*," he told her. "Probably some…sugar, or something."

Ro laughed again. "You sure it isn't the drool?"

Doni whipped around, throwing the dishrag at Ro. "Shut up!"

Ro laughed, gesturing at the rag now on the floor. "I'm not picking that up," she told him. "Listen, if you keep fawning over him like that, one of these days he's going to notice."

"You think so?" Doni replied, casually looking over his shoulder at the small stage. He cleared his throat abruptly. "I – I mean, I don't know what you're talking about. I'm just over here enjoying the set – *that's all*. Nothing wrong with that."

Ro leaned against the bar. "No, there isn't," she agreed. "Look, I'm just trying to prevent you from more heartbreak, okay? You don't exactly have the best track record."

"Don't worry. I'm keeping my feet on the ground this time," he assured her, refusing to look her in the eye.

Ro shot him with a look of disbelief, shaking her head. "Oh yeah? Come here – you've got something on your forehead." She reached out to him, brushing his curls from his eyes.

Doni, oblivious, stared at her in concern: "What? What is it?"

Ro licked her thumb and rubbed along the center of his forehead. "Just 'SIMP' right along here – in biiiig bold letters."

Doni swatted her hand away. "Fuck you. Get back to work."

Ro backed off, still grinning. "You ain't the boss of me," she reminded him, sauntering over to a shelf full of brightly colored liquor bottles. "Besides, I'm not the one daydreaming on the clock." She nodded toward someone sitting across the bar. "The little

missus is here tonight, though. You should be careful."

In the corner, shoved into a booth all by herself, sat Cynthia Hoffman – Andy's girlfriend. She scribbled anxiously in a small notebook, her blonde hair escaping from its braid and falling into her face. Doni glanced at her briefly before turning in a huff.

"She's not even paying attention," he mumbled. "Don't know why she bothers coming."

"Yeah, well, if you go to these things twice a week, every single week, it probably gets a little stale," Ro reasoned.

"I've probably watched him just as much – if not more – than she has, and you don't see me getting bored," Doni replied, busying himself with a stack of napkins. He didn't actually hate Cynthia – he barely knew her – but it irritated him that, more often than not, she hardly watched Andy's sets.

"Heads up," Ro noticed something behind him. "Loverboy, incoming."

Before Doni could react – he came face to face with a mop of red hair. His eyes then fell almost immediately to a small bit of exposed chest under a red flannel.

"H-Hey, Andy," he managed to squeak out, reminding himself internally to look at Andy's face instead. "Good set."

Andy settled down into a stool and glanced around the bar. "Was it okay?" he asked. "Quieter than usual in here tonight."

"It's a Tuesday," Doni said with a small shrug. "What are you gonna do?"

"Drink?" Andy suggested with a smile.

Without even asking for specifics, the corner of Doni's mouth turned upward as he placed a glass tumbler down on the bar. He tossed in a couple ice cubes and poured a small amount of whiskey.

"I like the way you think," he said, sliding the drink on over to Andy.

Andy welcomed it, tossing it back without wincing. He and Doni made brief eye contact before he swallowed and Doni quickly turned away, a very familiar blush creeping into his cheeks. Andy smirked, returning the glass.

"What do I owe ya?" he asked – a question he'd rehearsed many times over the last nine months.

Doni barely glanced over his shoulder before responding. "The day I start charging you for drinks, mate, check me into a mental hospital, got it?"

Andy smiled and nodded. Doni's answer never changed, but it didn't stop Andy from asking.

"Thanks, Doni." He rose from the barstool. "I should probably grab Cynthia and head out. I've kept her out late enough. See you guys on Friday?"

Ro waved absently, pouring drinks for a couple at the end of the bar. Doni opened his mouth, as if to protest Andy's departure, only to fall quiet, and nod curtly.

"F-Friday," he seconded.

Andy crossed to where Cynthia sat, still vigorously writing away. She jumped a little as he appeared by her side, a tired but wide smile dancing across her lips. Andy dipped down to meet her, his hand cupping her chin as he kissed her tenderly.

"You ready to go, babe?" he asked.

She nodded and packed up her things, following him outside. Ro, bottle in hand, stood next to Doni, following his gaze. She gave a soft sigh as they watched Andy and Cynthia depart.

"You gonna be okay, dude?" she asked softly.

"Yeah," Doni croaked. "Both feet on the ground, remember?"

Outside, the crisp fall wind scattered leaves along the cracked sidewalks. Cynthia shivered, nuzzling herself up under Andy's arm. He smiled and pulled her tight to him.

"You were great tonight," she said. "I especially love that last one – the cover. It's my favorite."

Andy grinned, kissing her cheek. "There's a reason I play it," he said.

Cynthia chuckled and rolled her eyes. "Sap."

"You love it," Andy moved his lips to her neck, eliciting the smallest of gasps. "Though, you could have fooled me. Every time I looked over at you, you weren't exactly paying attention." He frowned a little. "You know you don't have to come to these things, if you don't want to."

"I want to," Cynthia insisted. "I just have my work to do, too. I can multitask."

"That's what I call talent," he said low into her ear.

Cynthia's mouth twitched upward in a taunting grin. "Yeah, like you'd know what that word means…"

Andy pulled away quickly in mock-offense. "Excuse me?" he exclaimed, moving ahead of her. "That's it! You're walking home!"

He took two steps before breaking into a run toward the parking lot. Cynthia gasped and sprinted after him, struggling to keep up with his long legs and their wonky gait. Once she found herself within reach, she leapt onto his back, and he groaned loudly at the sudden weight.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa – ease up, soldier – bum leg here!" Andy commented, straining against the hold her arms had around his neck. His right leg, which often gave him trouble due to an old injury, shook slightly as he regained his posture.

"You know I was kidding, right?" Cynthia asked, clinging to him tight.

Andy locked his arm around her left leg and slinked his right under her butt, adjusting her into a more comfortable position. "I don't know," he teased. "Sounded pretty serious to me. Might just have to –"

"Andyyyy…" Cynthia whined, burying her face into his hair. "I'll make it up to you, I promise."

Andy peered up at her, curious. "Oh yeah? How so?"

Cynthia brushed her lips against his ear. "Give me a ride home, and I'll give *you* a ride when we get there," she whispered.

She didn't have to say another word. Andy felt his pants grow tight and his face flush, his mind reeling at the thought of Cynthia's offer. Without hesitating, he took off in the direction of their car, Cynthia squealing with laughter.

CHAPTER TWO

After navigating the first couple years of post-college life, Andy and Cynthia took the leap and moved across the country to a little po-dunk town called Danville on the West Coast. Danville had a whopping population of approximately 1,800 people, which meant apartments in the area were old, but cheap and functional, and chances were the lady who runs the market on the corner would cut you a deal on a ribeye if you offered to help change her tires.

Cynthia graduated with a degree in journalism and found work almost immediately after the move thanks to a healthy mix of talent and knowing the right people. Andy, on the other hand, struggled. His dream was to play music professionally but knew that – *realistically* – this was a path that required a lot of rejection and even more luck.

He had no intention of teaching, which was the only consistent kind of work he saw listed for people with music degrees. After three months of surviving solely on their savings and Cynthia's meager income – Andy caved and took up a job at a local convenience store, manning a cash register and stocking shelves for barely minimum wage. Despite the lack of creative stimulation in this line of work, the hours allowed him to participate in local open mic nights.

It took him far less time to find himself comfortable at the Tavern. He walked in one night solely to get a drink after his shift, when he saw the sign in the window looking for performers. Approaching the bar, it was nearly impossible to catch the attention of the bartender. Doni bounced back and forth, navigating around Ro, fending off drunk college students and several overly enthusiastic men, making comments about his jeans – specifically how his butt *looked* in said jeans. Andy settled at the end of the bar, not wanting to interrupt but smiled when Doni did a double take, noticing him for the first time. He dried his hands on a rag and made his way toward Andy, the corners of his mouth turning upward in a shy smirk.

"You're a new face," he said, brushing back his rogue curls. "What can I get ya?"

Andy felt his cheeks turn red. Doni was, without a doubt, one of the most attractive people Andy had ever seen. His low voice was barely audible over the din of the crowd, but Andy could detect the slightest bit of an accent. British, maybe? Perhaps Australian.

"W-Whiskey," Andy stammered. "On the rocks."

"Any preference?" Doni quirked an eyebrow.

"W-Whatever's cheapest."

Doni quickly snagged a bottle from the shelf behind him, glancing back at Andy over his shoulder. "Was I right?" he raised his voice to ensure Andy could hear him. "You new around here?"

"Yeah," Andy nodded. "Just moved a few months ago."

Doni set a glass down in front of him. "Well," he smirked. "Welcome to the neighborhood…" he trailed off, hoping Andy would offer an introduction.

"Andy," he said. "McLayne. You?"

"Doni," Doni replied. "Delaney."

Andy awkwardly reached out, shaking Doni's hand – letting it linger just a second too long. "Nice to meet you, Doni. H-How much for the drink?"

"Don't worry about it," Doni replied, waving a hand absently. "You're good. Newbie discount."

As Doni crossed back to the other side of the bar, Andy noticed that he glanced back over his shoulder for a final look. A small blush crept into Andy's cheeks as he maintained eye contact, taking a small swig from his whiskey. Doni turned away quickly, bowing his head as he started to clean a dirty glass, but even with his face partially hidden – Andy could see the smirk on Doni's lips. Andy pulled a five-dollar bill from his pocket and stuffed it in the tip jar. Ro noticed and shot Andy a curious look.

"I-It's for D-Doni," Andy stammered, nodding in Doni's direction.

Ro rolled her eyes and sighed. "Of course it is," she said. "I'll let him know."

Andy left quickly before she had the chance to tell Doni in front of him, but Andy made it a point to return to the Tavern as often as possible; practically claiming the barstool at the end as his own. It was far enough from the foosball tables and the dance floor that Doni and Andy could chat in peace. He was thankful for this little bit of socialization.

Andy didn't have friends. He had been popular in high school, but once he'd hit college, it wasn't quite the same. He'd forged a small group of people he hung out with on occasion, but he hadn't spoken to most of them since they'd graduated, and most were still on the East Coast. He was lucky to have even met Cynthia when he did. Their paths crossed by accident at a party hosted by a mutual friend. Cynthia was loud and nosy and fought fiercely for social justice. If she didn't already know everyone at a function, she made it her mission to get to know them. And Andy was often more than happy to let her take the lead in those situations. He was mesmerized by her passion for – literally *everything*. It was easy for him to fall in love with her, especially when that passion was directed at him.

Andy, on the other hand, was awkward in every sense of the word. He was unbelievably tall and lanky and pale, and he never knew the right thing to say in most social settings. He wore the same flannels almost every day of his life, and he preferred to spend most of his time alone with his guitar, working on his music. Music made sense. Music didn't judge or know too much. Music felt safe.

When they moved, Andy wasn't sad to leave the few people he knew behind. Getting away from his family had been the biggest priority. His mother was overbearing – and for good reason - nearly insisting he stay at home for the entire duration of his college career, so she could keep an eye on him. He was thankful his dad stepped in, assuring her that Andy would be fine living on campus. He couldn't even begin to imagine what his life would look like had he stayed at home.

But meeting new people was not Andy's forte, and while the customers at work filled some of his social battery, his co-workers did not. His supervisor was a freshly-eighteen-year-old high school dropout named Nadine, who proved time and again that she could hold her own against Andy, even without a diploma. She loved putting him in his place – which Andy could respect but did not inspire him to want to hang out with her outside of work.

So, Andy was thankful for Doni, and for Ro, once he'd got to know her, too. It took a couple weeks before Andy ventured to ask if he would be allowed to perform at open mic night. Doni excitedly added his name to the line-up, and after Andy's first performance, he was the loudest person cheering in the audience.

"You're really fucking good, mate," he commented, still in disbelief. "Holy shit. You're gonna be so good for business."

"Let the guy breathe, Doni," Ro chuckled, shaking her head as Doni bounced back and forth excitedly behind the bar. "He's no Jagger."

"Thanks for keepin' me humble, Ro," Andy grinned.

"It's what I'm here for," she replied, tossing a small towel over her shoulder. "You two be good. I'm gonna go restock some of the glasses."

When Ro disappeared into the back, Doni looked down, a little embarrassed at his excitement. "Sorry," he mumbled. "I just wasn't expecting you to be so…"

"Good?" Andy supplied. "You thought I would suck?"

"To be fair, most people here suck," Doni rationalized, leaning toward Andy on the bar. "You've heard them. They're not like you."

Andy shrugged but tried to smother his smile. He could smell Doni's cologne he was so close. "They're not bad."

"You're better," Doni said, resolutely.

From then on, Andy tried not to read too much into it, but Doni made sure he was there for every single performance. Although Andy was confident in his musical ability, he still had bouts of stage fright. College students were brutal as is about their opinions – and *drunk* college students were even worse. Not every show had a good reception, and he was thankful for the nights where Doni had his drink already waiting for him at the bar after.

Their friendship never left the Tavern though. Andy knew nothing about Doni or Ro's personal lives, though he thought he'd heard Doni talk about a boyfriend on occasion. He even swore he saw a tall dark-haired man with glasses kiss him goodbye during one of his sets – which caused Andy to nearly fall off his stool. *Purely coincidence*, of course.

Ro talked about their adventures into the city where Doni would drink too much at the gay bars and end up dancing on tables and she would have to carry him back to their hotel room. Doni insisted Ro was mistaken – and that she had been the one climbing onto furniture, but based on Doni's sheepish expression, Andy knew the truth. He wanted desperately to see this side of Doni but was afraid to ask if he could join them.

He wouldn't mind going to gay bars - although before his big move the thought would have absolutely terrified him. His hometown wasn't exactly progressive, and his family had made loud and public comments on others in their community who had come out. They were good people he tried to reason with himself – they were just products of their environment.

Andy didn't know how he identified, but he also felt like it didn't matter. What mattered was that he was with Cynthia, so he didn't press the subject any further.

But he'd be fine in a gay bar.

In fact, he *wanted* to go to one.

He was just scared to ask, and if they hadn't invited him yet, then clearly, they didn't want him to go.

So, he kept it professional. Their friendship blossomed solely within the Tavern, and when he went home – they lived in totally different worlds.

And sometimes, his world involved broken slushy machines and teenagers with way too much time on their hands.

"Hey!" Andy shouted at a small group crowded around the soda dispensers. They were mixing as many flavors together as possible, while one of them filmed on their phone. *Fuckin' social media trends.* "You know y'all have to pay for that, right?"

They giggled and dropped the cup in their hands, shouting *'Run! Go, go, go!'* before bolting out the doors; the chime going off for each of them. Andy glanced at the mess on the floor and groaned, knowing he'd have to be the one to clean it up. As he reached for the mop, the door to the break room opened and out strolled Nadine, her cellphone in hand, not looking up as she addressed him.

"Did you take your break yet?"

Thankful for an excuse to get out of cleaning the floors, he perked up a little bit. "Not yet," he said. "You need me to go now? I am getting a little hungry -"

"Nah," Nadine replied, hastily texting away. "We're slow and corporate says we gotta cut someone. You're up, buddy."

Andy frowned. "You're cutting me? Like…" he glanced at the clock. "Right now?" He'd only been there for maybe four hours. He couldn't afford to keep being the first one sent home like this.

Nadine nodded. "Before you hit six hours and shit gets legal, yeah. I'll cover the register."

"Why can't *you* go home?" he asked. He didn't *want* to stay, but Cynthia was going to be livid if he went home early again. She had begged him to take on more hours. "I need the hours, Nadine."

"I'm in charge, so I say who stays and who goes," she finally looked up. "Tick tock."

"I asked Rick for more hours," Andy protested. Rick was their store manager – an old hippie of a man who pretty much owned the place at this point, despite hardly ever stepping foot in the store anymore.

"Ain't gonna happen, buddy," Nadine snorted. "Unless you want to start working Friday nights."

Andy did not. It was open mic night. Without performing, none of this would be bearable. He needed to be able to play. He needed to see –

His friends.

When Andy didn't respond, Nadine rolled her eyes. "I didn't think so. So, come on – *shit!*" She nearly fell as her shoe slid through the mess of mixed soda on the floor. "Jesus Christ! Andy, can you clean this up?"

"I thought you said I have to –"

"Clean it up, and *then* you can leave."

CHAPTER THREE

Just on the outskirts of Danville, a small city bustled with more life than what surrounded Andy and Cynthia's apartment. Cynthia took Andy's car daily, while he opted for the bus, to get to work at WMIS – a moderately-sized news station that specialized both in print and television. Cynthia had been hired on the spot, at the recommendation of one of her professors. She had always longed to be on the West Coast, and Andy was willing to go wherever she was, as long as he could make his music.

In her first year at WMIS, Cynthia wrote short, mostly unimportant, pieces about local events: schools and charities, predominantly. Sometimes it was something a little more exciting when a park had been vandalized or a streak of bike thefts shook a small suburb nearby.

She'd gotten her first somewhat big break when a well-known local businessman, Francis Marconi, had been busted in a big insurance fraud investigation and she was brought in to help write the spotlight piece. She ran out the morning it went to print and tacked it up on their fridge as if it were a report card. Andy didn't seem to notice it at all, but Cynthia smiled every time she passed by it.

While Cynthia remained mostly unknown at WMIS, a few of her colleagues had reached out following the success of her article – one of whom made her heart stop almost entirely.

She stood in the small break room on the fourth floor of her building; coffee mug clutched tightly in her hands as she took several deep breaths – the words of the email she'd received that morning still floating through her brain. Cynthia had no idea how long she stood there, hardly taking notice when someone else entered the room.

"Coffee for lunch, eh?" a woman's voice cut through the painful silence. "Been that kind of day?"

Cynthia jumped, whirling around to face Anna Little – her coworker from the Lifestyle department. Anna had worked for WMIS for a lot longer than Cynthia, but the two became fast friends. Anna's curls bounced as she laughed at Cynthia's stunned expression.

"Jesus *Christ*, Anna!" Cynthia gasped, holding a hand to her chest, while she tried to stop her coffee from splashing.

"Whoa – easy there, tiger!" Anna cackled. "I didn't mean to scare you!"

Cynthia gripped her mug, trying to steady her shaking hands. "S-Sorry," she said, embarrassed. "I'm just trying to stay awake. Andy had a late show last night, and I am *struggling*…"

Anna crossed to the counter, checking the coffee pot for any remaining coffee. She gave it a small whiff and cringed, tossing it into the sink.

"I miss going out on weeknights," she commented, turning instead to the fridge where she snagged a small can of iced tea. "The last time Jeff and I had a date that didn't involve one of the kids, I'm pretty sure we both passed out by eight o'clock."

Cynthia nodded. "Andy and I will be there soon enough."

Anna whipped her head in Cynthia's direction, her eyebrows disappearing into her bangs, suspiciously. "Oh? Is there something you want to share with the class?"

It took Cynthia a moment to realize what she'd said, and what it implied. She shook her head quickly, waving one of her hands. "Oh, *God no*. No, no. No kids here. P-Possibly ever. I just mean he's going to burn out eventually. God knows I'm already feeling it."

"Tell Andy you can't come to his shows anymore," Anna suggested. "He's a big boy. He'll get over it."

Cynthia knew Anna was right. It would be a lot easier for her if she didn't feel obligated to go to every single show. Andy had never said anything about it – never pressured her to go – but she knew he liked having her there. Even if she wasn't prone to paying

attention. The effort was appreciated.

"Darren asked me to come to his office this afternoon," Cynthia changed the subject suddenly. Saying it aloud brought on a new wave of anxiety. Speaking it into the universe meant it was a real thing – that it had actually happened.

Anna cracked open her iced tea and froze, staring at Cynthia in surprised confusion. "Darren?" she echoed. "Like…Darren *Keating*? That Darren?"

Cynthia nodded. Yes, like Darren Keating. Like five-time winner of Anchor of the Year, Darren Keating. Darren Keating, whose picture hung on the wall of the main lobby. Darren Keating, who had never once even looked in Cynthia's direction before.

That Darren Keating.

He had asked to meet with her, but the email contained no additional details, and Cynthia had spent a good portion of the morning agonizing over what it could possibly be about.

"What does he want?" Anna pressed.

Cynthia glanced toward the doorway, making sure no one else was lingering nearby. "Hell, if I know!" she said. "I didn't even think he knew my name! Just sent me this meeting request. He probably meant to send it to some other Cynthia."

Anna shook her head. There were no other Cynthias who worked for WMIS – they both knew that. "Maybe he read your spotlight piece!" she said.

Cynthia scoffed. "Yeah, okay," she said, sarcastically. "He doesn't have time for stuff like that. He's got his own stories to worry about." She trailed off, looking at the floor. "Besides, I – I can't get my hopes up."

Anna crossed to the door of the breakroom, her low heels clicking against the tile. "Well, promise me you'll keep me in the loop," she said. "You know me -"

"Yeah, yeah," Cynthia nodded, rolling her eyes. "Unlike me, you prefer *tea*."

Cynthia raised her mug, and Anna did the same with her drink. Without another word, Anna disappeared down the hallway, leaving Cynthia to her churning thoughts and worries.

Placing her mug down on the counter, she pulled out her phone to check the time once again. She had about twenty minutes until she needed to meet with Darren. She didn't want to show up too early, because she didn't want to appear too eager – but she was afraid if she waited, something could happen – like a broken elevator, or visitor group blocking the halls – and she'd end up being late.

She sighed, realizing it was better to be safe than sorry, and she started toward the stairwell. She clutched her phone tightly, muttering under her breath nearly the whole way.

"You've got this. You've got this. It's *just* a meeting."

Darren Keating's office was on the eighth floor. Cynthia watched as each of the buttons lit up in the elevator, her stomach turning for every floor they passed. The hallway leading to his office was oddly quiet, and for a moment, she thought she might have gotten off too early. But the large gold nameplate next to his door reassured her she was in the right place.

Darren's door was closed, so Cynthia settled down on the small couch just outside it. She peered out the window and crossed her legs – then uncrossed her legs – wrung her hands together, pulled at her skirt, checked the clock, then checked her phone – finally crossing her legs once again, her foot bouncing anxiously.

What was only about ten minutes felt like hours. Cynthia almost left before realizing it wasn't even their meeting time yet. Just as she finished internally plotting out the apology email that she planned to send him when she finally chickened out – his office door opened, and Darren stepped into the hall.

Darren embodied what one would expect from a news anchor. He was tall, dirty blonde, and striking – a face perfect for television. He dressed impeccably, wearing a perfectly pressed button-up shirt and his blue eyes sparkled as he jumped, surprised to see Cynthia sitting there.

"Cynthia!" he yelped. "I'm so sorry – were you waiting for me? I was stuck on a call."

Cynthia stood quickly, shaking her head. "No – not at all. I was only here for a few minutes," she lied. "Y-You wanted to see me?"

Darren looked confused. "I did?" he asked. An awkward moment passed between them where Cynthia wanted to vanish beneath the floorboards and just *die* – but Darren

slapped a hand to his forehead and laughed.

"Oh, shit! That's right – I did! I wanted to talk to you about the Ridgeport story. I wanted to see if you would be interested in partnering to -" he stopped abruptly, looking concerned. "Can I get you a cup of coffee? No offense, but you look…exhausted."

Cynthia added this to the pile of reasons she would need to find a new job immediately. She was certain she would never survive the embarrassment of this encounter.

"S-Sorry – no. I'm good," she said. "I've already had so much coffee today, though I guess it isn't doing much good. I didn't get any sleep last night. My b-boyfriend had a gig at this bar, so we were out later than I expected. I didn't think anyone would notice."

Darren smiled. "Don't worry – I'll let you hide back in your office for the rest of the day after this." He eyed her curiously. "Listen, I'm sure he would understand if you had to miss a show or two…for sanity's sake."

"My friend Anna said the same thing," Cynthia said. "I *like* going – don't get me wrong. Andy just – I mean, he doesn't have much of a -" She didn't know how to put it into words without making it sound bad. "Sometimes the attendance just isn't –" She sighed. "He needs me to be there."

"Ah," Darren nodded in understanding. "I read you loud and clear." He shrugged. "Just don't forget to do things for yourself every once in a while. You've got dreams, too - I'm sure." He paused for a moment, as though he'd just thought up a great idea. "In fact, I think you should come to this dinner at Lazlo's on Friday night. It's a networking thing – some big whigs from the industry will be there. Could be a good night to make the right connections."

Cynthia resisted heaving another sigh. She couldn't do anything on Fridays. She needed to be there for Andy.

"I don't know," she hesitated, avoiding his gaze. "Fridays are open mic nights at the -"

Darren interrupted. "I'm sure Anthony will understand."

"Andy," Cynthia corrected him.

Darren didn't seem to care what Andy's name was. "Right," he said. "So, what do you say? You interested?"

Cynthia was, in fact, extremely interested. She would have given anything for this kind of opportunity and here it was, staring her right in the face. Certainly, Andy wouldn't mind if she missed *one* show.

"Yeah!" she blurted, surprising even herself. "You know what? Yeah! Absolutely. Lazlo's, you said?"

Darren nodded, now beaming. "Lazlo's – it's the little Italian place on -"

"Yeah, I think I know where it is," Cynthia assured him. "Never been. Could never afford it."

"You and me both," Darren laughed.

Cynthia *highly* doubted that.

"Why so far from the city?" Cynthia asked, curiously. "I mean, that's…Danville. That's where I live. Why not somewhere downtown?"

"Oh! Mr. Warner owns it," Darren explained. Nick Warner owned the station, too. Cynthia had never had the pleasure of meeting him. "It's just comfortable for him. And we're all less likely to be overheard. Not as many people."

Cynthia nodded in understanding. Having that many journalists and reporters in one place would be enticing to anyone trying to nab a story downtown. Lazlo's was still incredibly nice – especially for being in the dive that was Danville. She could even walk back to the Tavern after, if she wanted to. Maybe she wouldn't have to miss Andy's set entirely.

"How does eight o'clock sound?" Darren asked, interrupting her thoughts. "You uh…you need a ride?"

Cynthia shook her head. The thought of spending time alone in a car with Darren was overwhelming and terrifying. She could walk or she and Andy could carpool.

"I think I'll be okay," she told him – adding quickly: "But t-thank you! I'll see you there."

Darren nodded, repeating: "Eight o'clock?"

Cynthia's heart skipped a little. "Eight o'clock."

CHAPTER FOUR

A cross town, the bell above the door of the Tavern jingled as it swung open. Ro, who stood behind the bar, stocking shelves of glassware, didn't bother to turn around before yelling at the intruder.

"We're not open!"

Andy approached the bar, smirking. "I feel like I'm an exception to the rule," he said.

Ro peered over her shoulder, surprised to see him. "Oh! Hey, Andy – sorry, I didn't realize it was you."

"Would keep people out better if you locked the door," Andy pointed out.

Ro rolled her eyes. "If the door actually locked, that would be a brilliant idea." She shot him a dangerous look, catching herself. "Don't you *dare* share that information with anyone. I know where to find you."

"Secret's safe with me," he assured her. "I'm here for my guitar. Mike used it for his set last night and said he'd leave it here for me."

"Oh yeah," Ro looked around. "I remember Doni saying something about that. I think it's over in the corner."

Andy wandered to the space behind the small stage and spotted his guitar sitting on a chair. He slung it over his shoulder and started back toward the bar, pausing briefly. Ro stared at him, awaiting a question.

"Something on your mind?" she prompted.

Andy shook his head quickly. "No, not really –" he lied. "Doni's working Friday, right?"

Ro's face grew suspicious. "Why do you ask?"

Andy shrugged. "Just askin'."

Ro narrowed her eyes, not buying it for a second. Andy knew Doni's schedule. It rarely changed, and when it did, Doni made sure Andy was the first person to know. Ro found it an absolute miracle that Andy remained oblivious to Doni's feelings for him. Ro clocked it almost immediately.

"Yeah," Ro answered, hesitantly. "He'll be here. I thought he told you that last night."

Andy bit his lip. "Right," he said. "Yeah, sorry – I forgot. There was a lot going on last night." He cleared his throat loudly, looking back at the door. "Well, thanks for holding this for me! I'll uh – I'll see you guys on Friday."

"Mhm," Ro nodded curtly.

Andy nearly ran out the door, his face growing red. Ro sighed and reached for her phone, typing quickly.

Soooo...
Guess who was just here asking about you.

If it's Erik, I swear to God.

Guess again.

...No.
Seriously?
You're fucking with me.

I am not.

Just down the street, Doni paced his bedroom, staring at his phone screen, one hand covering his mouth as his mind spiraled over the thought of Andy asking about him.

"Fuck," he muttered to himself, both elated and anxious. "What did he want?"

Ro didn't respond for several minutes, nearly causing Doni to race down to the Tavern to get the information first-hand.

"Come on, Ro," he said, collapsing onto his bed with a frustrated groan. "Details, girl, details!"

His phone buzzed again and he grinned.

It wasn't a big deal. He was weird about it tho.
Asked if you were working on Friday.
"Just asking."
Bullshit.

!!!!!!!

Don't overthink this. He could just be stupid.

Too late.
He's not stupid. Don't be a dick.
Holy shit, Ro. Holy shit.

Doni fell back into his pillows, clutching his phone tightly to his chest as his face nearly split in half from smiling so wide. His heart raced as he pulled up a photo of Andy he'd taken at a recent show, and he thought he might actually have a heart attack.

"Fuck," he breathed, closing his eyes. *Holy shit.*

As Cynthia made her way toward her and Andy's apartment later that night, she couldn't help but skip a little, still daydreaming about her dinner at Lazlo's. She couldn't decide on what she wanted to wear – a professional but fashionable pantsuit, or perhaps the little black dress she'd bought for a friend's bachelorette party but had never worn. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been able to dress up for something important. It wasn't like she and Andy went anywhere other than the Tavern these days.

She climbed the stairs to their second-floor landing, and she froze, hearing music coming from inside. She glanced at her phone and frowned. It was far too early for Andy to be home. Slowly, she turned the knob and entered, trying to suppress her growing frustration.

Inside, Andy sat on the floor of their tiny living-room kitchen hybrid – his guitar sitting in his lap. He scribbled something in a small notebook before returning to his strumming, not noticing that Cynthia had come home.

She cleared her throat, getting his attention. "Whatcha workin' on?" she asked, sounding much calmer than she felt.

"Oh, hey gorgeous!" Andy didn't look up, the pencil clenched between his teeth. "Just uh – working on a new song. Nothing special."

Cynthia tried to tread carefully with her next question – one she was growing tired of asking. "You're home early," she commented. "Did they cut your hours again?"

Andy remained focused on his guitar. He knew Cynthia was going to be upset, but it wasn't like he could do anything about it. He had asked for more hours. They weren't giving them to him. He couldn't magically make them appear.

"Yeah," he answered shortly. "Business has been slow, so they sent me home."

Cynthia tried so hard not to sigh, but it came out anyway. "I thought you were going to ask if you could pick up a couple shifts."

"I did," he told her. "They're only looking for people to work Friday and Saturday nights. You know I can't do that."

Cynthia frowned. Andy *could* pick up Saturday nights but often worked in the early afternoons – which meant he was the first to go if someone had to be cut. On the days he got

cut, he liked to wander down to the Tavern. He saw it as a networking opportunity – the more he got to know the people who patroned the Tavern, the more likely they would be to show up and support his music. This meant he didn't protest too much when work sent him home early.

"I know," she said, not pushing the subject. "Speaking of which, I can't make it this Friday. I'm sorry – it's just one night. I hope that's okay."

Andy finally looked up, confused. He pulled the pencil from his mouth. "You got plans?"

Cynthia removed her bag and hung it on a small hook by the front door, then kicked off her shoes and moved toward the kitchen.

"Darren invited me to this networking dinner at Lazlo's," she explained. "Said it could be a big career move for me, and y'know…" She made a noncommittal noise, not looking at him. "I think he might be right. It couldn't hurt to meet some of the higher-ups…"

Andy got to his feet, following her. "Darren, eh?" he grinned. "Not the prick from Channel 7, right? The one who talks *like this*?" Andy did a weird, half-Shatner-like impression.

Cynthia stifled a laugh. "Andy, stop!"

He smirked. "*That* Darren?"

Cynthia nodded. "Yes, *that* Darren. But he's not a prick, Andy – he's actually a nice guy."

"I hate to break it to you, babe," Andy said. "But no one who looks like *that* is a 'nice guy' – I'm sorry."

Cynthia moved close to him, cocking an eyebrow. She traced a finger down Andy's chest, tauntingly.

"Careful, Mr. McLayne – or else I might think you're a little jealous or somethin'."

Andy closed the gap between them, dropping his voice low. "Yeah?" he asked. "Or somethin'?"

"You heard me," she teased. "*Or somethin'*. You know – there is one thing you've got that Darren doesn't."

"A personality?" Andy said, a little too quickly.

"No," she replied, ruffling his hair, playfully. "This mop of hair that I find insanely hot for some reason."

Andy smirked. "Thanks. I grew it myself."

"Show off."

A moment passed between them before Andy slipped his arms around her waist. From what he could tell, she wasn't upset anymore, and he knew exactly how to fix their evening.

He brought his lips to hers and kissed her slowly. Cynthia moaned, pressing herself against him. She knew what he was doing and while she was still irritated, she rather enjoyed him trying to make up for it.

Andy lifted her up as if to carry her to the bedroom. "You want pizza for dinner?" he asked, playing coy.

Cynthia shook her head. "I'm a little focused on something else at the moment."

Andy feigned innocence. "Oh? What's that?"

"Fuck you," she said, kissing him a little more aggressively than she had before.

Andy moved them toward the couch instead, laying her down beneath him. "That's the plan, baby," he growled, his lips traveling down her throat. Cynthia gasped and wiggled, eager for whatever he had in mind.

The best thing about being young and unmarried and without children was that Andy and Cynthia could have sex whenever they wanted, *wherever* they wanted – and they did. While they had it far less than they did when they were in college, they still found time – and the couch happened to be their favorite spot.

Cynthia leaned against the plush arm while Andy held her hips firmly, rocking into her from behind. The couch skidded across the floor and Cynthia cried out with each thrust, her nails sinking into the fabric. Every single thought about their financial struggles had left the building the second their clothes were off.

"F-Fuck, babe – o-oh my God," Cynthia buried her face in her elbow, her mouth opened wide as she felt her orgasm growing. "R-Right there. Please, *don't stop.*"

Andy bit his lip, trying to stave off his own climax – not wanting to finish before her. He was usually good about that, but it had been a few weeks since they'd last had the

time or energy to do this, and he wouldn't last much longer.

Andy groaned as he noticed Cynthia slip a hand between her legs, touching herself. Her whimpering increased as she threw herself backward against him, impatiently.

"Oh fuck, Cyn," Andy eyes rolled back.

Not satisfied with how quickly she was getting to her desired peak, Cynthia stopped him and directed him to change positions. "T-Turn around," she said. "S-Sit."

Andy sat on the couch, obediently, and Cynthia climbed into his lap. He hated it when she did this, as it took him out of the moment when he was so close, but he forgave her as soon as she rolled her hips against him, kissing him hard. This position wasn't any better in holding Andy off, as he loved the growing friction between them – the slower and deeper the better. If Cynthia didn't get there soon – he would explode.

"Oh – yes, yes, yes!"

There it was – the high-pitched whine that meant she was going to cum. Andy bit his lip and watched as Cynthia tossed her head back, falling into a rhythm as she rode him – her moaning now echoing off the walls. The neighbors were probably going to be pissed, but it had been ages since either one of them cared about being overheard.

Cynthia finished, her whole body shuddering against Andy – who gave a few final thrusts before groaning in release. As Andy caught his breath, Cynthia leaned her forehead against his, her thumb caressing his cheek.

"Still freaks me out doing that," he commented with a small laugh, noting that he hadn't worn any kind of protection.

Cynthia panted, closing her eyes. "I'm on the pill, Andy," she reminded him. "It's *fine*." She went quiet for a second. "A-And I mean – h-having a baby wouldn't be the *worst* thing."

Andy didn't respond. They'd talked about having kids many times before, but they'd decided they wanted to get married first. And even that – after almost five years together – still seemed like a far-off reality.

Cynthia frowned. "You okay?"

Andy nodded quickly – lying a little. Cynthia curled up in his lap and he held her tightly, falling eerily quiet. She immediately regretted saying anything, but it was already out there. They would have to deal with it later. Just like they'd have to deal with Andy's less-than-optimal income.

Knowing she was upset, Andy nuzzled her now very sweaty face. "I love you," he said, quietly.

"I love you, too," she murmured, quickly brushing away the tears from her eyes before he could notice.

CHAPTER FIVE

Friday arrived, and Cynthia stood in front of the mirror in their bedroom, her heart pounding as she fidgeted with the straps on her dress. She decided to go with the little black one – she'd only worn it once before, and there was something about it that made her feel *powerful.* If she intended to survive the night, she needed to feel powerful.

Her heels clicked loudly as she made her way into the kitchen. Andy stood by the sink, rinsing a small stack of dishes. He glanced over his shoulder as he heard her approach – his eyes growing wide at the sight of her. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen her dress like this.

"Holy shit…" he said, his voice low and impressed.

"Do I look okay?" she asked, fussing with the waistline. "It's a little tighter than I expected."

"You look incredible," Andy assured her, moving closer.

Cynthia turned, gesturing toward the zipper. "Can you help with the last little bit? I can't quite reach."

Andy obliged, planting a soft kiss on the side of her neck once it was secured. Cynthia closed her eyes and sighed as Andy slinked his arms around her waist, pulling her against him.

"How much time do you have?" he whispered into her ear.

"Down boy," she chuckled. "Not *enough* time, that's for sure. Save it for later."

Andy pouted, burying his face into her shoulder. Cynthia covered his hands with hers and gave him a little wiggle, knowing it wouldn't help the situation.

"Where is it you're going again?" he mumbled, enjoying this brief moment of closeness.

"Lazlo's."

Andy let out a whistle. "Swanky," he commented. "Can we afford it?"

Cynthia broke away from him and started to pace around the living room. "I think they're paying for everything. God, I *hope* they're paying for everything. Darren didn't really say." She shook her hands furiously, trying to rid herself of the anxious energy. "I'm so nervous, babe. I just need to – to get this over with."

Andy rubbed the back of his neck. "Relax, Cyn – it's just a dinner."

Cynthia froze, turning suddenly to face him. "It's not *just* a dinner, Andy. This is important to me, okay? This could mean a huge shift in my career. Do you know what that would mean for me? For *us*?" She stared at him, wringing her hands together. "We could get out of this dump. Get into a real house. We could start -" She stopped abruptly, looking away. "Y-You know."

Andy didn't know. He wasn't following. "Start what?"

Cynthia's face fell. She shook her head. "Nothing," she lied. "Never mind. Anna said something the other day that just – it got in my head. Forget I said anything."

Andy didn't know how to respond. Instead, he did what he did best and took her into his arms. Cynthia sniffled and laid her head against his chest while he gently massaged her neck. He could feel her breathing slowing against him, and for a moment, he wanted to suggest that they both stay home for the night. To talk about this.

"I'm gonna miss you tonight," he said, quietly.

Cynthia gripped his shirt tight. "Yeah," she sighed. "Me too."

A brief silence passed between them. Cynthia fiddled with one of Andy's buttons.

"Would you have…" she started, slowly. "Never mind."

Andy couldn't keep guessing what she was trying to tell him. He tilted her chin upward. "I need you to stop doing that," he said. "Tell me what you're thinking."

She bit her lip and paused, and he thought she might do it, but a second later, she

stepped back and started toward the front door. Andy huffed loudly, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"I'm going to be late," she said. "I need to go."

"Let me drive you," Andy offered. Maybe he could get some answers out of her in the car. "Lazlo's is close to the Tavern. We're going the same direction."

Cynthia didn't look at him. She was fighting a wave of oncoming tears. "I can just take the bus. It's okay."

Andy followed her to the door. "Not dressed like that, you're not," he said.

He didn't mean it in a possessive or misogynistic kind of way. She looked *incredible* and he just knew some of the assholes who hung out by the Tavern would have something to say about it. Not to mention the fact that she was wearing heels, and it was a long walk from the bus stop to the restaurant.

"Your feet are going to be killing you by the end of the night. Let me chauffeur you around a bit – pick you up after and everything."

Cynthia finally turned, giving a small nod. "Okay," she agreed. "That would be nice."

Andy pulled up just outside Lazlo's, hurrying out of the car to help open Cynthia's door. She chuckled as he bowed playfully, escorting her to the sidewalk. He got one more final look at her ensemble before pulling her in for a kiss.

"Not too late to go home and spend the night naked on the couch," he suggested, grinning.

"Later," she whispered against his lips. "I promise."

"Tease," he muttered, kissing her a final time. "Text me when you're ready to come home."

Cynthia nodded and started toward the restaurant. Andy stood by his car long enough to watch how the dress hugged her curves as she walked. It was moments like this he was baffled Cynthia had any interest in him at all. She was *way* out of his league, and he knew that.

In fact, it *terrified* him that *she* might know that.

Cynthia approached the restaurant, stopping short when she spotted Darren standing just outside the door. He was dressed a little less professionally than he did at the office – his black button-up shirt open enough to expose the smallest bit of chest hair. His face glowed from the light of his phone screen. He looked…nervous.

As she drew closer, Darren looked up, catching sight of her. A look of relief washed over his face.

"There she is!" he said, his newscaster voice booming. "W-Wow," it faltered just a little. "You uh – Wow! You look stunning."

Cynthia blushed, covering herself up with her hands. "It's not too much?"

Darren shook his head adamantly, looking her over. "Absolutely not," he insisted. "Look - they are going to *love* you. We rent out the whole place every couple of months. It's a lot of employees and clients – maybe some contractors, too, I imagine. Lots of people to schmooze with."

Cynthia looked at the door, chewing on her bottom lip. "Are you sure about this? Most of them don't even know who I am."

Darren stood in front of her, his voice firm and sincere. "That's the whole point, Cynthia. After tonight, they're going to be *begging* to know more about you. Just give them a chance to see what you've got to offer. Come on."

He offered her his arm and led her inside. What Darren had pitched as a dinner was actually a full-blown party. A live band played loud jazz music in the corner, while servers circled the crowds of people with platters of hors d'oeuvres. Cynthia clenched Darren's arm, her eyes wide as she tried to place any of the faces in front of her.

"I thought you said this was *dinner*," she hissed.

"Well," Darren laughed. "I embellished a little."

"You *lied* to me!"

"Just stay close to me," he said. "You'll be fine."

Cynthia didn't need to be told twice. Darren guided her around the dance floor, his eyes scanning the sea of people.

"There's my boy!"

A large man in an expensive looking suit sauntered toward them. Cynthia had never seen him before, at least in person, but was certain his photo was hung up in the WMIS lobby alongside Darren's.

"Mr. Warner!" Darren said, loudly.

Ah, yes. Cynthia realized who he was instantly. Nick Warner – the head of WMIS.

"You've brought a date!" Nick sounded almost surprised. "It's about time. Who is this lovely young lady?"

Nick's eyes glimmered as he looked Cynthia over. She couldn't tell if it was genuine interest on his part, or a considerable amount of alcohol, but his gaze made her feel self-conscious. She leaned into Darren a little more, as if she could hide behind his muscles.

"Mr. Warner, this is Cynthia Hoffman. She's one of our staff writers," Darren glanced down at Cynthia, offering her a supportive smile. "I've brought her with me to get her a little more acquainted with our side of the company. I think she could be an excellent addition to our executive writing team."

Cynthia's eyes widened – he hadn't mentioned this to her. She thought they were simply there to mingle and have a good time. She had no idea he was trying to get her promoted. She gave his arm a gentle squeeze.

"Is that so?" Nick said, amused. "How long have you worked for us, Miss…?"

"Hoffman, sir," Cynthia repeated her name for him. "I've been with the company for nearly a year now."

"Cynthia was the one who wrote the Marconi piece last month!" Darren jumped in quickly.

"You don't say…" a drawling voice sounded from behind them.

A striking woman appeared next to Nick, dressed as though she'd just walked off a runway in Paris. Her short dark hair framed her angular face, and her lips were painted a dangerous shade of red. There was no mistaking this woman – and Cynthia thought her heart stopped entirely the second they made eye contact.

"That was you?" the woman asked, coolly.

Darren's smile returned, this time with a touch more fondness. "Cynthia," he started, carefully. "This is -"

"Vera Cole!" Cynthia blurted. Of course, it was Vera Cole. *Everyone* knew who Vera Cole was. She was the whole reason Cynthia had sought out to work for WMIS in the first place. She was – a *legend*. Her pieces were gritty and cutthroat and brutally honest. She dominated in a world where men often thrived and paved the way for other women to do the same. If she couldn't *work* with Vera Cole, Cynthia wanted to *be* Vera Cole. "I'm – I'm a big fan of your work."

She immediately regretted saying it, annoyed with herself that she couldn't manage to stay cool for more than a minute. She could have literally said anything that would have sounded more professional.

Vera smiled, politely – though a hint of derision tugged at the corner of her lips. "I could say the same," she replied – and Cynthia literally thought she'd wet herself. "I was just talking about that piece with my team the other day. Great bit of journalism, my dear."

"You think you might have a spot for her, Ms. Cole?" Darren prompted. He slipped his arm from Cynthia's hold and instead, let it rest around her waist. His fingers gripped the ruched fabric just above her hip and she felt her heart skip a beat.

"Time will tell," Vera said, making no serious promises in the immediate company. "But enough business for now – get yourselves a drink and settle in! You *must* try those darling little crab cakes they're passing around. They're divine, darling. Just divine!" Vera eyed Nick and nodded her head toward the bar. It was clear she wanted to speak with him privately.

Nick caught on. "Yes!" he said, quickly. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Miss Hoffman. You're in good hands for the evening!" He patted Darren's shoulder as he guided Vera away in the other direction.

Once they were out of earshot, Cynthia released a squeal of excitement. "Vera Cole read my article!"

Darren nodded. "She sure did! See? I told you. Have faith in yourself and your

talent. These people here *want* to meet you. You've got this. Come on – let's get a drink."

Cynthia did not mind Darren's hand still settled on her waist, nor did she notice the people watching them carefully, whispering behind their own glasses – some, mostly women, even glaring in her direction. Nothing could bring her down from this high. Vera Cole knew who she was, and better yet, there was a possibility she wanted Cynthia for her team.

This beat out any old open mic night by far.

CHAPTER SIX

A

cross town at the Tavern, Andy gripped the mic stand as he tried to get to his feet – his right leg buckling uncomfortably. He had been sure to grab a stool for his performance this time but didn't imagine standing back up would be his problem.

"Whoa, hey, hey, hey – easy – you okay?"

Doni appeared next to him, letting Andy lean on him for support. Andy flushed a little, embarrassed that people were watching him struggle, but he didn't mind the help.

"I'm – I'm okay," Andy insisted through grit teeth. "Just a charley horse, I think." He was lying. His leg had been bothering him more than usual for quite some time now, but he refused to see a doctor about it. Doctors cost money. Money Andy didn't have.

"I've got your drink waiting." Doni rested a hand against Andy's chest, bracing him a little more as they stepped down from the stage. He gave Andy's side a supportive squeeze and they started toward the bar.

The set was good, despite the pain in Andy's leg. The crowd was bigger than usual – louder – as college students usually were when the semester was in full swing. Most weren't paying attention, which annoyed Andy to some extent, but he took this over a mostly empty bar any day.

Doni helped him to his regular spot and circled around the other side, scooting a small glass toward him. He winked and Andy felt his neck grow warmer.

He sipped his drink this time, instead of downing it as he usually did. He would need some pain meds when he got home, so he couldn't drink too much. He also needed to pick Cynthia up when she was ready. He wondered if she was having a good time at her party – and felt the tiniest bit guilty that he hoped she wasn't. He liked it when she was at his shows. If she had fun work things to do, she'd come to less of them.

"Little rowdy in here tonight," he commented as Ro made her way over to them.

"They're good for business," Ro replied, watching a group of students aggressively playing foosball behind them. "Bad tippers, but they drink a lot."

"Hey," Doni interrupted, leaning on the bar. "Ro tells me you were asking about me the other night." He tossed Andy a smirk. "What was that all about? You miss me or something?"

Andy glared in Ro's direction. Ro turned quickly, as if to hide her guilt. "You snitch!" Andy hissed.

Ro pretended to busy herself with a dirty glass. "Doni and I don't keep secrets. Sorry, pal."

Doni moved a little closer to Andy, his big, brown eyes blinking slowly. Andy rubbed his forehead before offering an explanation. He hated when Doni looked at him like that. It made his heart do this weird fluttering thing, which just didn't make any sense, because –

"Hey, Doni!"

A loud voice from the other end of the bar interrupted his train of thought – which was probably for the best. Both Andy and Doni turned to see a beautiful, muscular man in a crop top waving in their direction. Doni stood and drew a deep breath. Andy had seen this man a couple times before and based solely on Doni's reaction – he could tell Doni wasn't interested in having this conversation.

"I'll…be right back," he mumbled.

Andy watched as the guy placed a hand on the end of the bar, leaning in to touch Doni's shirt and then the side of his face. Andy felt a totally different emotion wash over him. Jealousy? Maybe. It wasn't like he'd never seen other guys flirt with Doni before – in fact, it was a rare night when it didn't happen – but the man had seen Doni talking to Andy first. It was just – well, *rude* of him to interrupt.

And touch Doni like that.

He was working.

"Don't worry," Ro said, spotting the look on Andy's face. "He's not interested."

Andy shook his head, looking down at his glass quickly. "Why would I be worried?"

He really hoped Ro wouldn't answer that question. He couldn't place the reason himself, let alone handle someone else giving him one.

"You're still his favorite," she replied, playing it just as safe as Andy was. "Aaron's shot his shot more times than I can count. Doni's not giving in that easy."

"Good. He can do better than that guy," Andy mumbled, casting a subtle sideways glance at the two of them.

Ro didn't disagree.

A moment later, Doni returned, tucking something into his pocket. Ro eyed him curiously.

"He give you his number?" she quirked an eyebrow. "*Again*?"

"I tried telling him I lost it," Doni said, his face growing red. "Guess he didn't get the hint."

"Why don't you tell him the truth?"

Doni eyed Andy, who was doing his best to pretend he wasn't listening in. He shrugged a little and crossed his arms, leaning against the barback this time, keeping some distance between him and Andy.

"He's friends with…" Doni explained, dropping his voice low. "*You know who*. There's no way I'm giving him a chance. Besides, I'm not…looking, right now. I'm taking a break from dating."

Ro rolled her eyes. "Oh, so that's what we're calling it."

Doni shot her a look, and she turned to help a young woman who flagged her down for a drink. Doni sighed and picked up where he and Andy had left off.

"Why were you asking about me?" Doni's voice didn't waver this time. He wanted to know the truth.

"Oh," Andy swirled his glass, so the ice spun around the bottom of it. The sound calmed his raging thoughts about the man in the crop top. "No big reason. It's just…easier for me to play when you guys are here. It's just nice to see friendly faces in the audience. A-And since Cynthia isn't here, I just wanted to make sure I had – you know – someone."

He was lying and he didn't even realize it. He hadn't known Cynthia wouldn't be there when he had asked, but it sounded convincing enough – even to himself.

"And I'm not 'someone' apparently," Ro interrupted, working on her drink order.

Doni allowed a reluctant smile, eyeing Andy carefully.

"It's not my fault I'm cuter," he commented, knowing this would get a rise out of Ro.

She whipped around quickly. "On *what* planet?!"

"Uh, *this one*," Doni taunted. "Did I or did I not just get a number five minutes ago? When was the last time *you* got anyone's number?"

"I," Ro replied sharply. "Have a girlfriend."

"So?"

"So, it means I'm not exactly *flirting* with my customers," she said. Doni knew this was a direct attack, and he was thankful Andy didn't seem to notice.

Doni turned to him. "Andy, you're going to have to be our tiebreaker. Who's cuter? Me or Ro?"

Andy gaped at the two of them before laughing uncomfortably. He shook his head. "No," he said. "Nope. Nuh uh. I'm not touchin' this one."

"It's because he knows it's me!" Doni said, exasperated. He winked in Andy's direction – causing Andy to finish his drink hastily – and beamed. "Don't worry, big boy. Your secret's safe with me."

Sometimes Doni's forward flirting surprised him even. Some days he could barely string two words together in front of Andy, while on others, he acted as though they were a couple. In both instances, Andy played along. This both confused and excited Doni for numerous reasons.

Andy stood abruptly – a sharp sting running up his thigh. He grimaced but tried to shake it off. "I think that's my cue," he said, horrifically aware of how red his face looked in the mirror behind the bar. Perhaps he could blame it on the alcohol – despite only having one

drink. “I’ve got to go get Cynthia.”

“Excuses,” Ro scoffed. “We all know the truth, Andy!”

“Not an excuse,” Andy insisted. “If I stay any longer, Doni’s just going to keep putting drinks down in front of me, and then we’ll be in some real trouble.”

“It’s uh, kind of my job,” Doni pointed out.

“And you’re *really* good at it, babe,” Andy said, slapping a five-dollar bill on the bar. “Just don’t let management know you never charge me. Don’t need you getting fired.”

Doni’s mouth twitched upward. “Won’t let that happen. You’d miss me too much. *Clearly*.”

Andy didn’t deny it.

“I’ll see you all on Tuesday?”

Ro and Doni nodded, and Andy turned, heading for the door. He was reaching for the handle when he stopped, glancing back over his shoulder. Doni was moving Andy’s stool from the stage, a strange expression on his face. Impulsively, Andy marched back over to him, catching Doni by surprise. He gripped Doni’s arm, just below his elbow, pulling him close.

“A-Andy? What –”

“It’s you, by the way.”

The words escaped Andy before he could even think about them properly. Doni’s eyes widened as he tried to understand what Andy was trying to tell him. It took him a moment for it to click.

“W-What?”

“By a landslide,” Andy added, his heart in his throat.

Before Doni could respond, Andy turned on his heel and disappeared out the door. Doni’s head felt like it had been electrocuted. Had he heard him correctly? Andy had called him cute before – hot, even – but it was never with that much tension and sincerity. The competition had been a joke – why did Andy feel like he had to give a serious answer?

If he was being serious…

“Excuse me!”

Doni jumped as a man stepped in front of him, trying to get his attention. He was dressed much nicer than anyone else in the bar and wearing sunglasses, even though they were inside and it was nearly midnight.

“You work here, kid?” the man asked.

“Huh?” Doni replied, a little confused.

“Do you work here?” he repeated, slowly.

Doni looked down at the dish rag in his back pocket and the stool in his hands. *Obviously*, he worked there.

“Y-Yes,” he said, awkwardly. “Why?”

“I’m looking for that red-headed guitarist who was just playing a little bit ago,” the man explained. “Do you happen to know where I can find him?”

Doni narrowed his eyes, suspiciously. He’d never seen this man in the Tavern before. “You just missed him” Doni nodded toward the door. “Why do you ask?”

The man didn’t answer the question. “Do you know how I could get in touch with him? Does he come by here often?”

Doni didn’t trust him. There was something incredibly sleazy about the tone in his voice when he spoke to Doni – as though Doni was some idiot. And his overall demeanor exuded – well, *asshole*.

“Who are you?”

The man all but rolled his eyes at Doni’s response. “Reid Hanley,” he introduced himself, not offering a handshake. “Axis Records. I’m interested in speaking with him about a possible business proposition. I think he’s got some talent, and I’d love to see if he’s got the chops for this kind of thing.”

“He’ll be back on Tuesday,” Doni said, curtly. “I can’t give you any information other than that.” It was true. Doni didn’t even have Andy’s phone number in the first place. He didn’t know if they kept that information on hand – and he’d never gathered up the courage to ask for it. “If not Tuesday, next Friday. He does all the open mics.”

Reid nodded, satisfied with this answer. “Tuesday or Friday, huh? Alright. I think I can work with that. Thanks, kid. I’ll be back.”

Doni watched as Reid left the bar entirely, the bell jingling after him – certain he and Andy would never see him again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cynthia giggled and chatted loudly – several drinks in and feeling much more confident than when she first walked into the party. Darren introduced her to nearly everyone in the restaurant, and she found that with him beside her she was less nervous. Although, she had to admit to herself, it could have also been the top-shelf tequila talking. Whatever it was, Darren enjoyed watching her come out of her shell.

After several hours of mingling, the two finally had a moment to themselves. They settled down onto a small leather couch and Darren leaned in close so she could hear him over the loud music.

"Are you having a good time?" he asked.

She nodded drunkenly, her face a bright shade of pink, and her hair falling from its updo. "I'm having a *wonderful* time," she admitted. "Thank you."

"No problem," he said, softly.

"Everyone's been so nice to me," Cynthia almost sounded surprised. "I didn't expect that."

"They're good people," Darren glanced around the room. "You just had to give them a shot. I told you they'd love you." He paused for a moment, working up the courage to ask her something. "Do you want to dance?"

Cynthia's gaze snapped to him, her stomach doing a somersault. "With you?"

Darren nodded. "Will Anthony get mad?"

"Andy," Cynthia corrected him for what felt like the hundredth time. She shook her head. "No, I don't think he'd mind."

Darren slid his hand into hers and pulled her gently toward the dance floor. The room was already spinning, but the dim lighting and sultry music made it feel almost like a dream. Darren wrapped an arm around her and held her other hand tightly – slowly rocking them back and forth.

Cynthia didn't actually know whether or not Andy would care about the dance, but he would certainly care about how fast her heart was beating, and how hot her whole body felt with Darren that close to her. It was dangerous and exciting – something she hadn't felt in God-knows how long. Without realizing she'd done so, she rested her head against his chest and Darren tucked it beneath his chin, releasing a heavy sigh.

Darren's heart was beating just as fast as hers. She could feel it through his thin shirt. Cynthia wondered why he was so nervous. Darren didn't seem like the kind of guy to get nervous.

"Excuse me," Vera's voice interrupted them. "Do you mind if we cut in?"

Darren jumped a little – releasing Cynthia immediately. Vera and Nick had rejoined them, staring between the two, expectantly. Darren nodded his head in Vera's direction, giving her a small smile.

"Absolutely," he said. "It would be an honor."

Darren offered a hand to Vera, while Nick did the same to Cynthia and they proceeded to dance. Darren felt a chill run up his spine as Vera pulled him in close, her lips dangerously close to his ear.

"I like this one," she whispered.

Darren couldn't lie to her. "I do, too."

"I think she's got a little crush on you," Vera teased, eyeing Cynthia. "It's cute."

"She's spoken for," Darren said, keeping his tone even. He wondered if Vera could feel how fast his heart was beating. Had he been obvious, too?

Vera let out a sharp chuckle. "Oh, darling, if that meant anything at all, I would never have married my last two husbands."

Darren shook his head. He knew there was some truth in going after the things you

wanted – but this was a line he wouldn't cross. It wasn't right – it wasn't professional – but *God.*

He watched as she danced with Nick and swallowed the lump forming in his throat.

She was fucking beautiful.

"We'll see," Darren said, quietly.

"Well," Vera grinned. "While you're taking your sweet time in making a move – I'm going to make mine."

Darren didn't quite follow.

"I want her on my team, darling. I'm going to ask her on Monday. Don't spill the beans – it'll be our little secret."

She tapped the end of his nose lightly and stepped away from him, implying that their work here was done – as was their dance. They turned to Nick and Cynthia, and Darren cleared his throat.

"Mr. Warner, would you mind if I steal my date back? It's getting late. They're probably going to be kicking us out soon."

Nick nodded, planting a kiss on the back of Cynthia's hand. "It was a pleasure, Miss Hoffman. I do hope that our paths will cross again soon." He turned his attention to Darren. "You take good care of this one, will you? Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Darren didn't know what Mr. Warner was capable of, but he gave him a short nod and took Cynthia back in his arms. She was warm – and a little sweaty from dancing – but she was smiling, and she didn't know it yet, but one of her biggest dreams would be coming true in just a few days.

Cynthia waved to Nick and Vera enthusiastically as Darren guided her toward the front door. Once outside, she linked her arm with Darren again and drew a deep breath – soaking up the evening air. They walked the perimeter quietly, sobering up a little and enjoying each other's company.

"You doin' okay, champ?" Darren asked as Cynthia giggled and buried her face in his arm.

She nodded against the soft fabric of his shirt. "I'm…perfect."

Darren felt the lump return to his throat. They were entering dangerous territory, and he needed to figure out a way to get her home safely before –

"Can I ask you a question?"

He peered down at her. "Sure."

"Why me?"

They stopped walking, Darren turning toward her, confused.

"Why did you pick me for this?" she continued, now frowning. She seemed to be searching his face for some kind of ulterior motive.

"I read your article," he explained, simply.

Whatever she expected for an answer – it wasn't that.

"You…what?" she asked, bewildered. "You actually *read* it?"

"I read a lot more than people give me credit for," Darren laughed. "I'm not just a pretty face, you know."

Oh, but what a pretty face he was, Cynthia wanted to tell him. Instead, she bit her tongue, letting him elaborate.

"I care about what's happening in the company," he said. "I've worked hard to get where I am, and I care about the work we're putting out into the world. I want to know that I'm representing honesty and integrity and professional journalism. *You* have a great voice. You deserve to be able to use it properly. With the right team." He paused for a moment. "Vera wants you for hers."

He shouldn't have said it. He should have let Vera send her offer over on Monday like she planned, but he couldn't help himself. With the way Cynthia looked at him, he would have spilled every secret he had.

"Seriously?" Cynthia didn't believe him. "God, this is just…too much. I – I never expected…*this*. I mean, I'm not *anybody*. There are so many people in the company - *no one* notices me."

Darren frowned. "I noticed you."

Cynthia couldn't tell if her heart had stopped completely or was beating so fast that she could no longer feel it. Goosebumps ran along her arms. She wanted to look anywhere but those ridiculously blue eyes – but she couldn't move.

“And sometimes,” Darren continued, a small quiver in his voice. “That’s all you need. Just one person, and everything changes. It happened for me – and now, I’m glad I can help make it happen for you.” Without thinking, he tucked a loose strand of her hair behind her ear, letting his fingers trace along her jawline. Cynthia couldn’t breathe. She was going to do something very stupid if he didn’t move. “You deserve this. You’re – You’re ambitious and smart. Wildly talented. Beautiful -”

The word coursed through her veins, sending a shockwave to her nervous system.

“Beautiful?” she echoed, usure she’d heard him correctly.

Darren realized too late what he’d said – he couldn’t take it back, but he could try to do damage control.

“Y-You know what I mean,” he dropped his hand quickly. “I mean, people notice you. Even if you don’t…notice them noticing.”

He looked downward and Cynthia stepped closer, her chest almost against his. He could tell she was still staring at him, but he hoped if he didn’t look at her, she would just forget what he said.

That was a lie. He didn’t hope for that at all.

“Darren…” she breathed.

He risked making eye contact with her again – something he only regretted for a split second as she grabbed the sides of his face, pulling his mouth to hers.

Every reasonable voice in his head told Darren to stop her. To point out that they’d both been drinking and that she couldn’t possibly want this – even if he did. Desperately. She needed to go home. To her boyfriend. They needed to stay professional.

As if she could read his mind, Cynthia backed away quickly – a look of mixed horror, shock, and embarrassment on her face.

“I’m so sorry!” she apologized loudly, covering her mouth with her hand. She stumbled away from him. “I’m so – f-fuck – oh my God. I – I didn’t mean to – D-Darren, s-shit! Shit!”

Darren hurried forward, grabbing her by the shoulders. “Cynthia…”

“N-No, no – I’m so sorry. I’m such an idiot – I don’t know what I was thinking -”

“Cynthia, listen to me – it’s okay!”

Cynthia gathered herself, steadying her breathing as she and Darren stared at each other. Instead of telling her they’d made a mistake, and that they needed to go their separate ways, he lost control of the words coming out of his mouth.

“I wanted to do that all night,” he admitted. “G-God, I wanted to kiss you so bad, b-but -” He took a nervous step toward her, closing the gap one more time. “M-May I…?”

Cynthia released a soft whimper and nodded. Whatever this spark was, it was stronger than anything she’d felt – possibly ever. She knew it was wrong – that she shouldn’t be kissing anyone who wasn’t Andy under flickering streetlights – but in the moment, it felt right.

In fact, it felt perfect.

So, she kissed him again. Hard.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Absolutely not," Ro shook her head vehemently, leaning against the back door of the Tavern to prop it open. "He did not say that."

Doni lifted a large garbage bag into the dumpster behind the Tavern. They were closing and getting ready to go home, and Doni desperately needed a cigarette after everything that had happened. He'd told Ro that Andy called him cute, but she didn't seem to be buying it.

"I swear to God," he said, pulling a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, popping one into his mouth. "Call me crazy, Ro -"

"You're crazy," she cut him off.

"He *might* like me!" Doni insisted. He lit his cigarette and inhaled deeply.

Ro sighed, wafting the smoke from her face as she let the door close behind her. "What happened to keeping your feet on the ground?" she asked.

"They're at least ground adjacent. Maybe just floating a little…" he trailed off, hearing scuffling and moaning nearby. "Jesus, get a room."

He and Ro rounded the building to see two people going at it against the restaurant across the street. Ro lost interest almost immediately, while Doni kept his focus just a moment longer.

"Hang on a sec," he stepped closer to the road.

"Doni, what are you doing?!"

The couple shifted and he finally got a good look at the girl. Even at his distance, he was positive he knew who she was. He'd spent so much time keeping an eye on her at the bar, there was no mistaking her.

"That's Cynthia…" he said, a little louder than he meant to.

"Cynthia?" Ro looked confused. "L-Like, Andy's…?"

"Holy shit."

Doni didn't know what to do. He wanted to take his phone out and take pictures or record it or something. Anything that would serve as evidence if he needed it later. He wanted to call Andy and tell him everything. He wanted to run over there and break them up – to yell at her for betraying Andy like this. He wanted to ask that guy if he knew Cynthia had a boyfriend.

He wasn't sure what he was going to do, but he figured he would figure it out along the way. He dropped his cigarette to the ground and stepped into the road – only to feel Ro's hand on his shoulder, yanking him back.

"Doni!"

"We have to do something, Ro!" he said, still watching Cynthia intently. "We at least have to tell Andy!"

"No!" she insisted, her eyes wide and almost a little scared. "Doni, no! You absolutely *cannot* tell Andy!"

"What?" Doni yelped. "Now, *you're* crazy! We have to tell him! He's our friend!"

"*Keep your voice down!* We don't *have* to do anything, Doni!" Ro held tight to his shoulders; afraid he might make a run for it. "He's our customer. That's all. He's…He's not your friend. And you have no right to butt into his relationship like this. It's -" She sighed. "It's not going to work out the way you think it will."

Doni narrowed his eyes. He didn't understand what she was implying. "What's that supposed to mean?" he asked, insulted.

"You're not going to tell him about Cynthia and then have him fall into your arms, so you can comfort him until he loves you. It doesn't work that way. Not in real life. If you tell him, he's going to resent you for it – *especially*, if he finds out that you have feelings for him."

Doni didn't want to trick Andy into wanting him. That's not what he'd been thinking. At least, not directly. It would make things a lot easier for him if Andy were single – that was true. But it would have also made things easier for him if Andy were into men. And that part he still wasn't sure about.

It just made him so angry – not only did Cynthia not pay attention at Andy's shows, but she was kissing other guys in public while Andy was at home waiting for her. He'd left the Tavern early to go pick her up. For all Doni knew, he could be waiting in his car around the corner.

He had to tell Andy.

"He deserves to know the truth," he said resolutely.

Ro still wasn't on board but wasn't fighting it either. It was getting late. She was tired. "Fine," she said, finally releasing him. "But don't come running to me if he *still* isn't into you after."

Doni felt himself shaking. He wanted to prove Ro wrong. "I'm not doing this to get him to like me, Ro!" he called out after her.

"Yeah," Ro chided. "Sure."

Doni started after her, shoving his hands in his pockets. "I'm serious. I – I just don't want to see him get hurt."

Ro rubbed a spot on her forehead and sighed – annoyed. "Getting hurt is a part of life, dude. If you want to tell him, *go ahead* – I'm not going to stop you. But I'm gonna tell you right now – it's going to be way better for you if you keep this strictly professional. It's none of our business."

As they reached the back door to the Tavern, Doni glanced back in Cynthia's direction one last time. He still hadn't decided, but he knew deep down that if it were his partner who was doing something like this – he would want to know.

"Oh fuck, Cynthia…" Darren moaned against Cynthia's neck. He had her pressed to the back wall of Lazlo's and if they weren't careful, Darren was certain they would go too far. He already imagined what it would be like to take her home with him. Carry her up to his bedroom, undress her slowly – kiss her from head to toe while she moaned his name. He wanted her so badly.

As his lips traveled along her shoulder, Cynthia came to her senses, her hands pressed firmly against his chest as she pushed him away.

"N-No!" she said quickly, shaking her head. "No – D-Darren, we need to stop. We can't do this."

Darren looked confused. As he opened his mouth to respond, Cynthia ducked under his arm and started toward the road quickly.

"Cynthia, wait!" he called out. "Where are you going?"

"I'm so sorry!" she choked back tears, her voice breaking. "I have to go!"

Darren hurried after her. "Cynthia! Let me drive you home at least!"

Cynthia shook her head and broke into a hobbled run. She didn't want to get in a car with Darren – didn't *trust* herself in a car with Darren. He wasn't the problem – *she was.* She'd lost control and it was unlike her to behave this way. She needed fresh air to clear her mind.

"I'll see you at work on Monday!" she yelled back at him, her heels resounding loudly against the pavement.

Darren watched as she darted down the road, debating whether or not it would be smart for him to go after her. She was drunk, and alone, in the middle of the night.

But then again – she said no. A larger part of him wanted to respect that decision and give her space. This was her neighborhood – she told him that. Andy couldn't be too far away.

With a heavy sigh, he started toward his car.

Andy spent a good portion of the night scrolling through his phone absently, waiting for Cynthia to call. He checked the time again – just after midnight – and still nothing. He wondered if her phone had died and if he should just go to the restaurant to collect her. She would hate that, though – he was sure of it. If she didn't call by one o'clock – he would make the trek.

To distract himself, Andy pulled up Instagram, and without thinking, typed Doni's name into the search box. His face popped up on the screen next to the username *aDonIconic*. Andy didn't get it but clicked on the profile anyway.

Doni posted – *a lot*. Andy didn't know why he hadn't thought to look him up before, but in reality – he didn't use social media much. People thought he was trying to be cool when he said that. The truth was he didn't understand it and was too lazy to learn.

He had profiles, of course, but he only posted on occasion. Mostly photos of his guitar or of Cynthia. Rarely photos of himself. Which is why his heart jumped when he noticed his familiar red hair on Doni's profile grid.

He sat straight up, pulling up the post. It was a photo from an open mic night, with Andy performing on stage, singing emphatically. His head was tilted back; his mouth opened wide in song. Doni had captioned it:

"My favorite night of the week, by far."

He'd added a music note *and a heart*.

Andy tried to stifle a smile. His thumb touched the screen, scrolling back a little further. Photos of him and Ro and some other girl at a party in Del Luna Valley. Andy recognized her as Sheila, Ro's girlfriend. He'd only met her on a couple occasions, as she worked overnight shifts at the local hospital and rarely came into the Tavern, but she seemed fun. In the photo, Doni was wearing a mesh crop top and extremely tight leather pants – a shot glass held high in his hand. *This* was the Doni he'd only heard about in stories. Andy desperately wanted to meet *this* Doni.

As Andy stared at the photo – he shook his head. It was no wonder guys were all over him at the bar. Doni was, without a doubt, a stunning human being. It wasn't even a question of attraction, really – Andy argued with himself. It was an undeniable fact. Doni was *really* fucking hot.

Andy scrolled back one more photo and nearly choked. It was a thirst trap. Andy had to adjust himself on the couch, embarrassed that his body had responded to it the way it did. Doni was shirtless, splayed out on lounge chair by a pool. Andy held his breath as he scanned over the tattoos on Doni's tanned skin. He did his best to ignore the fact that Doni's swim trunks were soaked and hanging low, clinging to him tight – leaving nothing to the imagination. His eyes lingered a little too long on the outline of what could only be Doni's dick. Catching himself, he forced his gaze upward - his eyes growing wide as he noticed shiny bits of gold on Doni's chest.

"Holy shit…" he said aloud. "His nipples are pierced?!"

Andy closed the app quickly and laid back on the couch, a hand falling to his forehead. He was very sweaty all of a sudden, and he wanted to blame it on the desert heat, but he knew the truth. There was no one in the room he needed to fool or hide from. He groaned as he reluctantly slid a hand into his waistband, reaching for the aching problem in his pants. He had time for this, he rationalized. As long as Cynthia didn't call.

Andy did his best not to think of Doni and his wet bathing suit or his piercings, but every time he tried to think about Cynthia instead – Doni made a surprise appearance, and Andy hated how it made him twitch and moan when those beautiful brown eyes manifested in his mind.

Andy gave in and focused on how Doni said his name – how his hand had felt on his chest earlier – how he'd squeezed Andy's side as he guided him off the stage. He found himself grinning stupidly as he envisioned Doni kneeling in front of him, ready to take Andy in his mouth.

Before he could finish the fantasy, Andy released a loud gasp, his cock jolting sharply in his hand. Groaning, he got up reluctantly to clean his mess.

Now spent, Andy curled back up on the couch, changing the channel to some old Western movie. He left his phone on the floor, deciding he'd done enough scrolling for the night. A tiny part of him was ashamed of what he'd done – but the larger part of him argued that everyone fantasized about their hot friends. In fact, it would probably be weirder if he didn't.

Andy didn't actually believe that. He didn't fantasize about any of his other hot friends. Not that he really had friends, let alone hot ones. Shoving his face into the arm of the couch, he drifted off to sleep.

Across town, Doni faced a similar predicament. He sat on the porch of his apartment building, cigarette in hand as he also scrolled through Instagram.

AndyURaStar.

Doni took a long drag from his cigarette, the corner of his mouth twitching upward in a small smile.

The Killers, he thought. *Cute.*

Of course, Andy would have excellent taste in music. Doni shouldn't have expected anything different.

Instagram was the only way he could reach Andy outside of the bar, he'd realized, and his thumb hovered over the "message" button for what felt like ages.

He couldn't bring himself to do it. He stared at the photos on his page, most of which were Cynthia and sighed, staring off down the road. Ro had a point – which was that he would forever be associated with this information if he were to be the one to tell Andy. Andy would never be able to look at Doni without remembering Cynthia's betrayal and he didn't want that.

But, at the same time, he couldn't just sit back and watch his friend move forward in a relationship that wasn't healthy. He couldn't let Cynthia sit in his bar, watching Andy play, knowing that she was thinking about someone else.

With a frustrated grumble, he stamped out his cigarette, got to his feet, and went inside up to his room. He paced the floor, fidgeting and searching for a distraction – he didn't want to watch a movie, he didn't want to get high, he didn't want to jack off – he wanted to talk to someone. He wanted to talk to Andy.

But that wasn't possible, so instead – he called someone else. Someone he was certain would answer, no matter how late it was. Someone he had no business calling.

The line connected and a low voice filled the room: "Hi, you've reached Erik. I can't come to the phone right now, so leave a message and I'll get back to ya!"

Doni hung up quickly. It was stupid. He shouldn't have called Erik. That was a mistake. And –

The phone buzzed. Doni looked down at the screen.

Shit.

Incoming call: Erik Tripp.

Doni had no real excuse not to answer it and yet – he didn't. He tossed his phone on the bed and flopped down beside it, waiting for the screen to light up again, indicating he had a voicemail. It took less than a minute. Without moving from his spot, Doni reached out and tapped the screen, listening to Erik's voice once again, now sounding a little more panicked.

"H-Hey, I'm…going to assume that was a butt dial, since it's so late. But if it wasn't and you want to talk – call me. O-Or text me. Whatever you want. Just want to make sure you're okay. O-Okay, bye."

Doni groaned and rolled over onto his stomach, burying his face into the mattress.

"Fuuuuck…"

Cynthia rubbed her eyes, trying to wipe away her running mascara as she approached home. She had texted Andy, but he didn't respond, which was unlike him. She wondered if he'd fallen asleep. She could hear the television on in the living room.

Opening the door carefully, she released a sigh of relief as she spotted him snoring on the couch. Slipping off her shoes, she crossed quickly into the bathroom where she turned on the shower. She needed to wash away, quite literally, everything she'd done that evening. She needed to get Darren's cologne off her skin and out of her hair. Had to scrub his lips from hers, her neck, her shoulders – her *mind* - but the more she thought about him, the more she ached for him. The more she wanted him to finish what he'd started.

As the steam of the shower enveloped her, she let the tears fall – unable to tell if she was crying over what she'd done, or what she longed for.

Stepping out of the shower, she stared at her reflection and felt the guilt sear

through her stomach. She'd never cheated on anyone before. This wasn't like her. And it wasn't like she didn't love Andy – *she did* – more than anything.

So, why had she acted so impulsively? What about Darren changed everything?

It could never happen again, she told herself. She would find a way to tell Andy everything. He was reasonable, and he loved her, so he would understand. People made mistakes. They could go to therapy if they needed to. She would show him she wanted this.

As she caught her own gaze in her reflection, a sinking feeling hit her square in the chest.

But *did* she want this?

Shaking, she changed into pajamas and crossed to the couch, sitting down next to Andy, who did not react to her presence. She touched his hand lightly, giving it a gentle squeeze, before leaning over to kiss him. Her free hand caressed his cheek and brushed his hair out of his face. When he still didn't wake up, Cynthia decided to let him rest and retreated to bed, alone.

A few minutes later, Andy awoke with a start – nearly falling off the couch.

"Shit!" he shouted, reaching for his phone. "Cynthia!"

He unlocked the screen – first noticing the time – which was much later than Cynthia would have been out, then the slew of text messages telling him not to panic and that she was getting a ride home. He got to his feet and peered into their room, spotting Cynthia in bed. He thought it was strange she hadn't woken him but didn't take it personally. Undressing, he climbed into bed behind her, kissing her shoulder gently.

"Hey, baby…" he said softly, trying to see if she was awake. "I'm sorry I missed your call."

Cynthia froze. She hadn't called. He apologized for something that wasn't even his fault.

"It's okay," she said quietly, taking his hand in hers, and pulling it close. "I got a ride home."

"I saw. Why didn't you wake me up?"

Because I'm a fucking asshole.

"You looked comfy."

Andy snuggled closer, nuzzling his face into her hair. "I'm comfier here," he said. "I hope you had a good time tonight."

Cynthia choked back a sob and blinked furiously, trying to stop the oncoming tears. She hoped he didn't notice the way her voice broke when she responded. "I did," she said. "I'm sorry, baby, I'm just – I'm really tired."

"That's okay," Andy conceded. "We can talk about it in the morning, if you want."

Cynthia nodded. Andy paused for a moment before rolling her back toward him, his lips meeting hers. Cynthia felt her body relax against him. Had the night gone differently, she would have climbed on top of him – like they had planned – and they would have spent the night wrapped up in each other.

"I love you," Andy said, planting a second kiss on her forehead. "I love you so much."

Cynthia didn't respond, but not because she didn't feel the same for him. She didn't respond because at that moment, she was unable to hold back her emotions. She turned back over so he could no longer see her face, and the tears started to fall.

CHAPTER NINE

Ro rounded the corner of the bar, surprised to find Doni on his knees, rooting around in the cabinets. Piles of paperwork – receipts and invoices, mostly - towered on the floor next to him. She crossed her arms and cocked an eyebrow in his direction.

"You lose something?" she asked.

Doni jumped, nearly smacking his head on the cabinet door. "We keep contact information for our performers, right?" he asked. "Like, the regulars?"

Ro's suspicions rose. "Why?"

Doni continued his search, not looking at her. "No reason."

"If it's for a professional one," she said. "Then, I'll tell you. But if this is just so you can stalk Andy -"

"I'm not stalking," he responded bitterly. "I just need to talk to him about something."

"And it can't wait until tomorrow?" she asked.

Doni got to his feet and closed the cabinet, crossing instead to the bulletin board by the door to the kitchen. He came to a halt as he noticed the new schedule had been posted.

"What the hell is this?"

"That would be…the schedule?" Ro replied.

"No shit," he said, moving closer to it. He traced the row next to his name and tried to control his panic. "I'm not working Friday. I always work on Fridays. What's going on?"

Ro shrugged. "I didn't make it. Probably had a conflict with one of the others. It's just one Friday, dude – don't freak out. Or see if someone can switch with you."

Doni turned to her, hopeful. "Can I switch with *you*?"

"*Hell no*. Fridays are the only reason I make *any* money around here. Ask Gemma or something. She's in the kitchen."

Doni didn't even hesitate. He burst through the kitchen doors, shouting.

"GEMMA!"

A girl with short, haphazardly chopped blonde hair, peered out from the walk-in fridge, looking confused.

"Hey, Doni – what's up?"

Doni had to play it chill. Gemma was one of the cooler bartenders. She often went with him and Ro to the city, and he was pretty sure she and Ro had hooked up at least once. With Sheila's permission of course. In fact, she might have even been there, too. Doni didn't pry – Ro's business was her business - although he was curious to know.

But that wasn't important right now. Doni was convinced, with the right kind of leverage and a little eyelash batting, he might be able to sway her to give up her Friday shift.

"I need you to switch shifts with me on Friday," he said bluntly. He realized a moment too late that he was, in fact, not playing it cool at all.

"No fucking way," she said, her hands landing on her hips. "You get to work *every* Friday. I get maybe two Friday shifts *a year*. Let someone else have a turn! I've got bills to pay, too!"

"Gemma," Doni decided to go for pity. Pity could work. "Please…" he whimpered, lightly.

Gemma tossed him a dangerous smirk. "This have anything to do with that redhead you've been crushin' on?"

Doni avoided her gaze. "No," he lied.

"Oh my fucking God, dude," Gemma laughed hard. "You're such a bad liar. Listen." She sighed. "Just because you're not working doesn't mean you can't *come in*. You can come in and support him, you know, *as a friend*. And then maybe, just maybe, you could go somewhere else and get a few drinks alone. Get to know him without you being stuck behind

the bar."

Doni stared. He hadn't even thought about that. He wanted to hang out with Andy outside of work more than anything, but he'd never pitched the idea to him. He wanted to invite him to the city, to take him out to the clubs and bars in Del Luna, but he didn't know how comfortable Andy would be with the idea. God, he just needed to ask.

Andy, are you into dudes, at all? Asking for a friend.

Who is me.

I'm asking.

"You okay?" Gemma asked when Doni went completely silent. His far-off gaze was accompanied by a lopsided smile.

"Y-Yeah," he stammered. "T-That's a great idea. You're a genius, Gemma – thank you."

"I know," she nodded, smugly. "But – hey - I thought this wasn't about him?"

Doni rolled his eyes. "I lied. Bye, Gemma."

Cynthia scoured the fridge in the break room for something with an insane amount of caffeine that would also not give her a heart attack. She had done absolutely no work all morning and urgently needed a distraction.

"You're acting weird," a voice sounded from behind her.

Anna entered the break room, once again interrupting Cynthia's train of thought. Anna, Cynthia thought, must have had a sixth sense for when she was feeling her most vulnerable. She always seemed to turn up, ready for any gossip Cynthia was willing to share.

"You've got to stop doing that!" Cynthia groaned, snagging the can of soda closest to her.

"Did something happen on Friday?" Anna's tone was almost accusatory. Cynthia worried for a moment that someone had already spilled the beans and Anna was testing her.

"What?" she played oblivious. "No! What would make you think that?"

Anna chuckled. "That kind of a response would make me think that. Come on. Spill."

Cynthia turned and walked toward the counter. "Nothing happened," she lied. "It was just a bunch of boring schmoozing. Honestly, it was a little overwhelming. Too many people and too much alcohol. Bad combination."

Anna didn't believe her.

"I met Vera Cole!" Cynthia changed the subject, her nearly jumping an octave. "She read my article about the Marconis. Said she might have a spot for me on her team!"

Anna's mouth dropped open. She made a sound somewhere between a gasp and a scoff and shook her head. "That's not *nothing*, Cyn! That's so exciting!" She paused, her expression falling. "Why don't you sound excited?"

"I am excited," Cynthia insisted. "But I don't want people to think I got the job, just because I -"

She stopped suddenly, catching herself. She'd been thinking about it all weekend. If Vera offered her a position and then someone found out what she and Darren had done – they would accuse her of trying to sleep her way to the top. She couldn't handle that kind of accusation, especially since it was so far from the truth.

"Cynthia," Anna pressed. "What happened?"

Cynthia glanced around the room, listening closely for approaching footsteps. Realizing they were entirely alone, she heaved a sigh.

"You have to *promise* me you won't tell a soul."

Anna looked too excited for Cynthia's own good, but she had to tell someone or else she would explode. Anna could talk some sense into her. Certainly, she would tell Cynthia she was being crazy – that she couldn't mess up what she had with Andy over Darren, who probably had at least a dozen women lined up for him. There was no way he could possibly be seriously interested in Cynthia. She wouldn't believe it.

"I kissed Darren."

"DARREN KISSED YOU?"

Cynthia clapped a hand over Anna's mouth, her eyes darting once again to the

doorway. Anna's voice carried, and Cynthia would be lucky if it didn't make it all the way down to the lobby. Maybe a few people in accounting didn't hear her.

"Shhh!" she quieted her, speaking very frantically. "No! No, no, no – *I* kissed him. It's very important to note that I did the kissing. It was me. I was in the wrong. H-He didn't do anything!"

Anna didn't care whose fault it was. She wanted details. "But did he like…you know…?"

"Reciprocate?"

"Well, yeah!"

Cynthia wanted to deny it. She wanted to say it was terrible, and they'd ended it after just one kiss. That they both agreed it was a mistake and civilly went their separate ways.

"Yeah," she blushed, spilling the truth. The muscles in her jaw were starting to ache from how hard she was trying not to smile. "He said he'd wanted to all night, but I'm the one who made the move. A-And it doesn't matter! Because it was unprofessional of me, and if word got out – *especially* if Vera invites me to be on her team – it's going to look really bad. For the both of us."

Anna frowned. "Did you tell Andy?"

Cynthia's heart sank and she looked at the floor, ashamed. "No," she mumbled. "I wanted to. I went home ready to tell him everything, b-but I just cried in the shower and went to bed. And the next morning, he was extra sweet. Made me breakfast and everything. He thought he'd missed my call for a ride. *He* felt guilty."

Anna looked just as conflicted about the whole thing as Cynthia was. It took her a moment before she responded with: "You gotta tell him, Cyn."

"I know!" Cynthia said, frustrated. "I know – listen, I know. Andy and I just – well, we aren't as open with each other as we used to be. You know? I don't know why I suddenly feel like I can't tell him things. He's just…off in his own little world most of the time. I can't get through to him."

Anna nodded slowly. "And…how do you feel about Darren?" she asked.

"I can't feel *anything* about Darren!" Cynthia insisted. "I'm not allowed to. This isn't going anywhere. I swore that was it. Never again."

"You need to talk to *both* of them."

Cynthia knew Anna was right. She needed to talk to Andy more – that was the more important conversation. But she couldn't avoid Darren forever, especially if she started working for Vera and the TV news folks. They'd be working closely together. They'd need to maintain some kind of professionalism.

"Can we get out of here?" Cynthia asked, hugging herself. "I'm suddenly not very hungry."

Anna nodded and the two headed for the door in heavy silence. Nearly back to their floor, Anna shook her head and chuckled.

"I can't believe you kissed Darren Keating."

Cynthia shushed her hastily. "Anna!"

"No, I'm serious! Do you know how many women in this office would *kill* for the opportunity? Myself included?"

"Anna!" Cynthia repeated. "You're married."

"I said what I said, babe."

Back at Cynthia's desk, she did her best to shake all thoughts of Darren and focus on work. She had an article about a new laundromat opening downtown, which she'd been dreading, but it was better than nothing.

Switching windows on her computer, her eye caught something in her inbox. Her palms started to sweat as she clicked on the newest email – from Vera Cole.

Miss Hoffman –

It was a pleasure to meet you last Friday. Your work with the Marconi article was some of the most thorough and articulate work I've seen come out of that office in ages. It's rare for someone in your position to get that kind of opportunity and you knocked it out of the park. I would like to offer you a spot on my executive team, if you're interested. I think you'd be better suited for more investigative, meatier pieces. Do let me know your thoughts, sooner rather than later, and we'll get your transfer set up.

Even though she knew it was a possibility – even though Darren had spilled the beans – she was still in shock. This was real. It was happening.

And for a moment, it almost made every worry she had about her little affair disappear.

CHAPTER TEN

Cynthia didn't tell Andy right away about her promotion. In fact, she waited three whole days. In a rare moment of peace, they snuggled on the couch, watching an old Adam Sandler movie. Cynthia laid her head on Andy's chest, and it wasn't until halfway through the film that he realized she hadn't even laughed once, which was unusual for her. As he glanced down, he noticed she wasn't even looking at the screen.

"Hey," he said softly, giving her a squeeze. "Are you okay? You've been quiet."

Cynthia nodded, not looking at him. "I'm okay," she insisted. "I've just got a lot going on at work."

Andy wasn't satisfied with this answer. "…anything you want to talk about?"

Cynthia sighed and hesitated before sitting up, curling up in the spot opposite Andy. He did the same, his stomach twisting painfully as this often indicated a difficult conversation. He racked his brain for anything he could have possibly done wrong.

"I think I got a promotion," she said.

This had not been what Andy was expecting. She was so serious about something that should have been so exciting.

"Babe, that's amazing!"

Cynthia allowed a small, nervous smile and nodded. "Yeah, it's – it's great! But it's also really scary. I'm going to be working with the woman who's essentially been my writing idol since college. A-And I feel like such a fraud. I'm not good enough to work for her. But she read my piece on the Marconis and -"

"Which piece was that?"

The words fell out of Andy's mouth before he could stop himself. It was a simple question – but not the right one to ask. Cynthia's expression fell and she blinked at him slowly.

"The…spotlight piece I did a few weeks ago," she said. The article was still hanging up on the fridge. "The one…Andy, it was on the front page."

Andy tried to recall it, but he came up empty. In all actuality, he didn't read her articles. He didn't keep up with the news, which always irritated Cynthia, but it just wasn't something that interested him. When she talked about work, he often tuned out completely.

"I guess I missed that one," he said with a nervous laugh, avoiding her gaze.

Cynthia drew a deep breath before standing.

"Forget it. It's silly."

She marched into the kitchen, her face stoic and unreadable. He could tell she was upset; he just couldn't gauge *how* upset.

"No, Cyn -" Andy stood as well. "It's not silly. I'm sorry. I should have read it."

Cynthia crossed to the cupboard and pulled out a mug, not responding. Andy gave her a few seconds before speaking again.

"Are you mad at me?"

Cynthia sighed. "No, Andy, I'm not mad." Despite this, her tone was cold.

"You *look* mad."

Her jaw tensed and she closed her eyes. "I'm *not* mad, Andy. But I won't be at open mic on Friday." She drew a deep breath. "Actually, it's probably best if I don't go to the Tavern for a bit. I'm going to be busy with this new role. I'll be in the field more and -"

Andy stepped forward. "Are you sure? Because this feels like retaliation, and I didn't mean to upset you, Cyn. You write so many articles. I can't keep up with -"

Cynthia whipped around, her fists clenched tight. He could tell even from his distance she was shaking. "No, it's not fucking retaliation, Andy! F-For once, maybe this isn't about *you!"*

Andy stared. Cynthia didn't like raising her voice, and Andy didn't handle anger well. They were in slightly uncharted waters – both of them unsure what to do.

"You are mad."

Cynthia gave an exasperated sigh, raising her hands in defeat. "Fine. Yes. I'm a little mad, Andy. The article is right on the fridge." She pointed at it, and Andy looked down, suddenly guilty. "I just – I just need a minute, okay? Give me some space tonight."

"Cynthia…"

Andy didn't want to do that. He hated knowing people were upset with him – especially when that person was Cynthia. He wanted to hold her and apologize and maybe they'd make out on the couch and laugh about this later. He wanted to promise he'd read every single article that came out from here on in – but, instead, he froze. He continued to stare at her with a look of pure devastation on his face.

It was Cynthia who finally moved first, pulling him into a tight hug. The second she embraced him he locked his arms around her waist and buried his face in her neck.

"I'm sorry…"

"We're okay, baby," Cynthia reassured him. "We're okay. I just want a little time to read or something. Just give me like an hour and then we can figure out dinner."

Andy nodded and Cynthia kissed his cheek. As she retreated to their bedroom, a cup of tea now in her hand and a book tucked under her arm, Andy wondered how romantic and apologetic he could possibly make mac and cheese feel. Maybe he'd light some candles. That'd do it.

Thursday afternoon, Cynthia headed back to her office after a surprisingly boring and normal lunch with Anna. Anna had insisted they get lunch together every day leading up to her department transfer, and Cynthia reminded her, repeatedly, that she wasn't going to be working anywhere else. She was only changing floors.

Since she'd received the email from Vera, Cynthia decided to put a little extra effort into her appearance at work. If she was going to be representing Vera and her team, she had to at least look the part. Her feet were killing her though, as her high heels echoed off the hallway walls – she would have to remove them once she got back to her office.

"Cynthia?"

Cynthia came to a halt. She spent most of the week avoiding Darren and almost made it to the weekend. She figured if she let a week go by, he would get the hint, and they could put everything behind them.

Against her better judgement, she peered over her shoulder at him. He looked a little disheveled – but in a way that screamed 'I might look like this on purpose, but you'd never know' – and Cynthia wondered if he'd been agonizing over her all week, too.

"There you are," he sounded almost relieved. "I've been looking all over for you."

Cynthia didn't know what to say and didn't trust her gut to take over if she opened her mouth. Darren stepped closer and her stomach did a flip.

"Have you been…avoiding me?" he asked.

"A-Avoiding you? No." she lied. "Of course not. This week has just been really crazy. I'm actually off to a meeting, so I can't -"

"I heard Vera offered you the position," he pressed, taking another step toward her. "Did you take it?"

Cynthia knew she wasn't getting out of this conversation. She did her best to slow her heart down and nodded. "I did," she told him calmly. "Thank you, by the way."

Darren looked confused. "I didn't do anything."

"But you did," Cynthia pointed out. "You introduced me to her. And I imagine you had *some* influence on her decision. That's doing something, Darren. I really appreciate it – *sincerely* – but I need you to know that we can't –"

"Cynthia, look - can we talk?" he cut her off. He gripped his hands together tightly and Cynthia could see the tiniest outline of sweat along his forehead. "About what happened?"

Cynthia stepped backward, looking anywhere but at his face. She rubbed her arm uncomfortably. "I don't think that's a good idea," she said.

Darren looked down the hallway before grabbing her hand and pulling her toward the elevator. “Come with me.”

“Darren,” Cynthia protested.

“Just trust me.”

They rode up to the eighth floor together in silence, Darren’s hand still clinging tightly to hers. Cynthia glanced at him anxiously, trying to figure out fifty different ways to tell him they shouldn’t be alone together. It wasn’t professional. It wasn’t safe.

And she knew the longer she was around him, the less control she’d have over her actions.

They reached the eighth floor and Darren led her to his office. The second the door clicked shut, Darren released a spew of apologies.

“L-Look, Cynthia, I am so sorry for what happened. I don’t know what I was thinking – I should have never -”

Cynthia gaped at him, stunned. “Wait!” She stopped him. “Why are *you* apologizing? Darren, this was all my fault. I’m the one who started it.”

Darren turned, his expression serious. “But I didn’t stop it,” he said. “I continued it. Look, I know it was wrong. A-And if you tell me to fuck off and never bring it up again – I will. But we’re stuck working together one way or another, so we at least need to decide what we’re going to do about it, o-or we just need to learn to live with the fact that it happened. We can’t let it get…weird.”

Cynthia felt her face grow hot. He had a point. There would be no avoiding each other now that she was on Vera’s team. They had to find a way to move on.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“Please, don’t apologize.”

Cynthia shook her head. “We can’t *do* anything about this, Darren. I can’t have people thinking I only got this position because I’m sleeping with her favorite reporter.”

Darren laughed nervously, his cheeks turning a bright shade of red. “Whoa, easy there, tiger,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “We only kissed. U-Unless you remember something I don’t.”

Cynthia hadn’t meant to put it that way. Obviously, they hadn’t slept together, but it looked bad no matter how they spun it.

“No one is going to think that,” Darren continued. “Vera doesn’t work that way. I couldn’t influence her decision one way or another if I tried. That woman is a one-person army, and a stone-cold bitch – s-said with so much love and admiration. Her words, actually.”

Cynthia couldn’t help but smile, which made Darren smile back. It did not make things any simpler that he was so easy to talk to. He was attentive and engaged in what she had to say, and he was – interesting. Not that she didn’t think Andy was interesting. The two of them were just *different*.

“You got in on your own merit, Cynthia,” he said. “I need you to recognize and believe that, because if you don’t know your own worth, Vera will chew you up and spit you back out. And I don’t want that to happen because you *deserve* this. You’ve *earned* this.” He moved a little closer to her. “Take me out of the equation entirely, because I’m not in it.”

Cynthia nodded a little. “Thank you,” she replied, her voice strained. “I needed to hear that.”

Darren paused, his expression softening a little. “So…I’m going to assume we’re just going to be friends going forward.”

“I have a boyfriend, Darren,” she reminded him, as if he’d forgotten. “So, yes.”

Darren accepted this, raising his hands in submission. “Then, I’ll back off. I swear I’m not trying to be a homewrecker here. That’s not my style – even if people like to paint me that way. I just – I just got caught up in everything. And you really are just…”

Cynthia didn’t let him finish his sentence. “Darren,” she warned.

“Right. Right.” He sighed. “I’m done. I promise. I won’t say anything else, unless you change your mind.”

Cynthia should have told him she wouldn’t. She should have reminded him that she loved Andy and wanted a future with Andy. But for some reason, she couldn’t make that promise.

“Can we work together? Professionally?” Darren asked.

“Yes,” Cynthia agreed. “I think so.”

It was clearly not the outcome Darren had hoped for, but he seemed content with

this answer. It was better than avoiding each other forever.

Cynthia hesitated before turning to the door. “Before I leave, can I do something that’s…a little unprofessional?”

Darren looked more hopeful than he should have – they both recognized this, but Cynthia didn’t plan on going back on her decision so quickly. This move had innocent intentions. She wrapped her arms around him, heaving a sigh of relief. Surprised, Darren slowly did the same, resting his chin on her head. He rocked her gently, and she breathed in the smell of his cologne.

“I’m working with Vera Cole,” she said, her eyes brimming with tears. “I can’t believe it, Darren.”

“I know,” he said, smiling fondly. “I am so proud of you.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

On Friday, Andy was met with an assault of sound as he opened the door to the Tavern – more college students crammed in the tiny bar than usual. Normally, he would be excited to have such a crowd for a performance, but Cynthia wasn't coming – again – and when he approached the bar, Doni was nowhere to be found.

"Hey, Andy!" Ro called out as she navigated around Gemma behind the bar. "You should be all good to set up whenever you're ready! Do you need a stool tonight? You might have to grab one for yourself – we're slammed."

"Y-Yeah," Andy tried to peer into the kitchen as Gemma opened the door. Still no sign of Doni. "I can get it myself; that's no problem."

Gemma returned, flashing Andy a knowing smile. He didn't know her as well, but she seemed cool from their few interactions. She just never worked Fridays. He wondered if Doni was sick and she had to cover for him.

"Hey, Ro?" Andy followed her down the bar. "W-Where's Doni?"

Ro grabbed a bottle off the shelf. "He didn't tell you?" she asked. "He's not working tonight. They didn't put him on the schedule. He was super bummed about it."

Andy felt his stomach drop. No Cynthia. No Doni. For the first time in well over a year – Andy had stage fright.

"Something tells me he'll live," Gemma chimed in, winking in Andy's direction.

"Easy for you to say," Ro said. "You're the one who wouldn't switch with him."

"Don't worry," Gemma insisted. "He'll be fine."

Maybe Doni would be fine, but Andy certainly wouldn't be. He was sure of it. He grabbed a small stool from the end of the bar and dragged it over to the stage. The sounds of the crowd faded as he started setting up his equipment. It was almost like he was underwater, his breathing and his heartbeat drowning out everything else.

As he set his guitar down on its stand – the bells over the door jingled and Andy turned, feeling a wave of relief wash over him. Doni entered the bar, nervously. He immediately caught Andy's eye and gave him a little wave.

"Hi," he mouthed, unable to hold back his smile as he nodded his head toward the bar.

Andy waved back, his grin almost identical to Doni's, and watched as he made his way toward Ro.

This Doni was the Doni he'd seen on Instagram. He wore a tight silk shirt, a dark brown that complimented his bronzed skin tone, with a lively pattern. His jeans were tight-fitting, and he'd used some kind of product in his hair that made his curls glisten in the low lighting.

It took a moment for Andy to realize he'd been staring and he hoped no one else had noticed.

Doni approached the bar and Ro stopped short, glaring at him. "What are you doing?"

Doni leaned on the bar, thankful to be on the other side for once. "Hello to you, too."

Ro moved closer, dropping her voice low. "I mean, what are you doing *here*?"

Doni feigned innocence. "I'm just here to support a *friend*."

Ro turned quickly to Gemma, who was trying and failing to hide a smirk. "You did this!" Ro accused. "You set him up! This isn't going to end well, and it's going to be all your fault!"

Gemma shrugged. "Let them live a little, Ro."

"It's going to be fine," Doni assured her. "Get me a drink, and I'll get out of your hair."

Ro scoffed, turning her back on Doni. “I’m not serving you. You want something, you make it yourself. Gemma, don’t you *dare* give him anything. Both of you are on my shit list tonight.”

Ro turned her attention to a couple at the end of the bar, and Gemma tossed an apologetic smile in Doni’s direction. He shrugged and decided to make his way back to the stage.

Andy jumped when Doni appeared in front of him, his heart racing almost instantly.

“Hey handsome,” Doni greeted him.

Andy moved to the edge of the stage, peering down at him. “What are you doing here? Ro said you weren’t scheduled to work.”

Doni bit his lip, gesturing over his shoulder. “You want me to leave? I can go, if you want me –”

“No!” Andy said, a little too eagerly. “N-No, please don’t. I just wasn’t expecting to see you…”

Andy didn’t know what possessed him, but he hopped down from his little platform and pulled Doni into a hug. Doni’s eyes widened, surprised by the gesture. He gave Andy a comforting cuddle and Andy thought his heart might explode.

“Did you miss me that much already?” Doni asked, amused.

“Y-Yeah, actually.” Andy muttered. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Doni paused, nestling his chin into the crook of Andy’s neck. He breathed in the smell of Andy’s cologne and prayed Andy couldn’t feel how fast his heart was racing.

Neither of them let go.

“Me too,” Doni finally whispered.

By the bar, Gemma sidled up to Ro, her expression cocky and taunting. Ro shook her head slowly; her eyes fixated on the boys embracing in front of her.

“Well, fuck me, I guess,” she said, admittedly surprised.

“You wanna place bets on how long it takes for them to hook up?” Gemma offered, elbowing Ro in the side.

“Absolutely not,” Ro declined.

A long pause passed between them. It looked like Andy and Doni were having a very intimate conversation, and Ro couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Maybe there was something she’d missed along the way. Maybe there was more to the story than Doni let on.

“I give it a month,” she said.

Gemma snorted loudly. “Ha! No chance. Two weeks – tops. I promise you, by the time my birthday party rolls around – those two will be fucking.”

“You’re on,” Ro agreed. “What are the terms?”

“Hundred bucks,” Gemma said. “And I get to work at least a month’s worth of your Friday shifts.”

“You’re on. But if Doni gets hurt – then it’s all your fault, and the bet is off. Do you understand?”

Gemma nodded. “Don’t worry. All they need is a little…push.”

Doni and Andy separated, laughing nervously, both a little flushed. Doni took a step back, eyeing the tables closest to the staging area. Only one table seemed to have an open seat, so he wanted to snag it as soon as possible.

“I’ll be over here, okay?” he said, moving toward it.

Andy picked up his guitar and addressed the crowd – only receiving a handful of attentive whoops. His eyes fell on Doni who gave a supportive smile and whistled. It was all he needed to feel okay again.

He began to play, doing his best not to focus on Doni the whole time, but it didn’t help that he was the best audience member. When Doni was behind the bar, he was often blocked by other guests or busy multitasking, but here – Doni was front and center, his gaze fixated almost adoringly on Andy. He’d never noticed how captivated Doni was when he performed. No one had ever looked at him like that before. Not even Cynthia. It was exhilarating. And because of it – Andy gave one of the best performances of his life.

Still riding the high, Andy concluded his set to overwhelming applause. Even the students and other patrons seemed to be more on board than usual. For the first time, Andy felt a little like a rock star.

He leapt from the stage, arms once again outstretched to Doni who was still applauding. Doni welcomed the second embrace of the night, trying not to read into it too

much.

"You were so good!" he said, brushing some of Andy's hair out of his face. "Best set, yet." It took everything in him not to kiss Andy on the mouth.

"You think so?" Andy asked excitedly. "It felt really good." He panted, trying to catch his breath. "Are you uh – are you stickin' around, or are you heading out? D-Do you want to get a drink with me?"

Doni beamed. "I would love a drink."

The boys made their way over to the bar, where Ro forced a smile, still a little frustrated with Doni.

"Hey!" she said, overenthusiastically. Andy didn't notice – but Doni did. "Great set, Andy! You were on fire tonight. What can I get for you?"

"Jameson. On the rocks." Doni and Andy said in unison.

Andy looked down at Doni, who blushed. Ro's mask fell for a moment as she shot a look in Doni's direction. In retaliation, Doni leaned his head on Andy's shoulder and grinned. Fuming, Ro turned around to prepare Andy's drink.

"Insane crowd tonight," Andy pointed out. "Glad to know I'm not scaring the customers away. You'd tell me if I was bad, right?"

"Clearly, you're not, mate," Doni looked around at the room. "They loved you. *We* love you."

"Some of us more than others," Gemma mumbled.

Doni flipped her off out of Andy's line of sight. She chuckled and disappeared into the kitchen.

"These people are lucky they get to hear *the* Andy McLayne before he starts selling out stadiums like he's fucking Taylor Swift," Doni added.

Andy's mouth twitched upward. "You think she'd be into it? I should give her a call."

It took Doni a moment to get the joke, slapping Andy's arm when it finally clicked. "That's not what I meant!"

"Alright, that's enough flirting for the night," Ro butt in. "Any more of this and I'm gonna cut both of you off."

"Jealous, Ro?" Andy taunted.

Doni's mouth dropped open. He'd been ready with a zinger, but Andy beat him to the punch. He was both impressed, and admittedly, a little turned on.

"Hey, Don –" Andy turned his attention back to Doni. "Can you do me a favor and tell Cynthia about all this when you see her? I think she's starting to think all of this is a waste of time."

"Which part?" Doni cocked an eyebrow at him. "The fucking Taylor Swift part or the you flirting with me part?"

Andy mocked offense. "You know what," he backed away. "Maybe it's time I found a new bar to play at – *since I'm so popular* – and maybe some new friends while I'm at it."

Doni grabbed his arm, tugging him back, playfully. "You wouldn't dare, asshole."

As Andy turned to respond, he was interrupted by a man in a suit. Doni was stunned, recognizing him as Reid Hanley – the man who'd been asking about Andy the week before. Doni's hand slid down Andy's arm, lacing his fingers with Andy's almost protectively. He gave a gentle squeeze and Andy didn't move.

"Andy McLayne!" Reid announced. "It's about time! I have been trying to track you down, sir. You're not the easiest man to find – ironically – considering you look a little like a traffic cone."

Andy looked confused and a little insulted. He'd never seen this man before. Why was he acting like he knew him?

"Do I know you?" Andy asked.

"Reid Hanley," Reid held out a hand to introduce himself. Andy shook it skeptically. "Nice to meet you."

Doni tugged on Andy's sleeve with his left hand – his right not leaving Andy's grip. "This guy's been asking about you," he explained, keeping his voice low.

"I think you've got talent, kid," Reid interrupted. "Shared some of your recordings with the folks at my studio, and they loved you!"

"My recordings?"

"Yeah, well – what you had online at least, which wasn't much," Reid said. "You

really oughta freshen up your social presence. You're lucky I'm good at what I do."

Andy stared, still lost. "I'm sorry. You said…studio?"

Reid's expression fell. He almost looked annoyed. "You really don't know who I am?"

Andy shook his head.

"Have you heard of Axis Records?"

Andy's eyes lit up. That name was familiar. Axis Records was one of the largest record companies in the region.

"Y-Yeah! Of course!"

"Well," Reid pulled down his sunglasses and grinned. "You're lookin' at the face of Axis Records. And – if you play your cards right – I'm the guy who could make you a star."

Doni gripped Andy's hand tighter. He didn't like this guy at all. Something about him exuded sleaze – which could be dangerous for Andy. He wanted to pull Andy away from him and go back to their conversation, but the second Reid mentioned the record label – he knew he had Andy in his pocket.

"Andy," Doni said quietly. "I don't know if you -"

Reid scowled in Doni's direction before turning his attention back to Andy. "So, what do you say, kid? You ready to change your life? Or do you want to be stuck in dumps like this for the rest of it? Up to you."

Andy was absolutely intrigued – as long as this guy was the real deal. He was healthily skeptical about it, but he couldn't help but also be excited. He'd worked so hard for this moment.

"I mean, sure!" Andy agreed. "W-What do I need to do?"

"I'd love to have you come down to the studio!" Reid said. "We'd have you do a few recordings for us – we'd deliberate – and then talk about deal options. That sound good to you?"

It sounded fucking amazing. Andy couldn't believe he was hearing the words 'deal options' from a record executive. He couldn't wait to tell Cynthia all about it.

"You think you could make your way down to Del Luna this weekend? Tomorrow, even?" Reid asked.

Tomorrow? That was awful soon, Andy thought. He could probably get someone to cover his shift, though – and even if he couldn't, then he would just call out. He couldn't let himself miss out on this opportunity.

"We'll get you set up at a hotel – I know it's a bit of a drive," Reid continued, as if to sweeten the deal. "We'll take good care of ya, I promise."

"Yeah! Okay!" Andy said. "Tomorrow it is."

Reid pulled Andy into another aggressive handshake, this time causing Andy to separate from Doni's grasp. "You're not going to regret this, Mr. McLayne. I swear it. Here." He handed Andy a business card. "That's the address and my phone number. If you need anything in the meantime, give me a call. Otherwise, just check in at the front desk, and I'll come down to get you."

He turned back toward the door, hollering at Andy over his shoulder. "We're going to do great things together, McLayne! You'll see!"

As Reid left the building, Andy shook his head slowly, still trying to process everything that happened. He turned his attention to Doni, just to confirm he wasn't crazy, and was shocked to see that Doni wasn't smiling. In fact, he looked extremely concerned.

"Did that just happen?" Andy asked.

Doni half-shrugged. "I guess so."

Andy frowned. "You okay?"

"I mean," Doni started carefully. "You have to go check it out and find out for yourself if it's legit or not. I – I wouldn't commit to anything until you know."

"Hey," Andy took Doni by the shoulders. "I'm not doing anything impulsive, I promise." He took a deep breath before suggesting: "Come with me."

Doni blinked in surprise. "W-What?"

"Come with me," Andy repeated. "To Del Luna tomorrow. If you're not working that is."

"I – I am," Doni stammered. "I have to -"

"I'll cover for you!" Gemma appeared out of nowhere, interrupting them. "Go to the Valley, Doni! It'll be fun!"

Doni stared back and forth between Gemma and Andy, unsure of what to do. Of course he wanted to go to the city with Andy. Of course, he wanted to spend *any* time outside of the bar with him. But this was all happening so fast.

He locked eyes with Andy again, who gazed at him, pleadingly. Doni knew, instantly, that he would never be strong enough to turn down this kind of offer.

"Y-Yeah," he decided. "Yeah, of course, I'll go with you. Whatever you need."

Andy looked relieved. "Perfect – I'll pick you up here around eight? That sound good?"

Doni nodded. Andy grinned and backed away toward the front door. "Great! I should probably get home, then. Big day tomorrow - I'll see you in the morning!"

When the door closed behind Andy, Doni released the breath he'd been holding. Ro appeared next to him, immediately clocking his anxiety, as best friends do.

"Don't do it," she said.

"What?" he yelped.

"Don't go on this trip," she advised. "Don't do anything you're going to regret. This isn't one of those 'oh no, there's only one bed' romance stories, okay? If there's only one bed – you sleep in the fuckin' tub, you hear me?"

Doni rolled his eyes. He knew she was right – he would have to behave himself, which was rarely something he enjoyed doing. He just didn't want to admit it.

"Where's your sense of adventure?" he asked. "Where's the Ro who would have been rooting for this? The Ro who actually enjoys life and dancing on tabletops and shit?"

Ro crossed her arms. "She's still here," she said. "But has been stuck babysitting, because *someone* keeps making crazy choices. And not like crazy fun – like, crazy, self-sabotaging, 'you might need clinical help' choices. Need I remind you that I'm still running defense against Erik, because you refuse to deal with *that* mess? I know how you operate, Doni. Don't do anything with Andy unless you're sure this is what you want."

Doni stared at her, a little offended. "I'm not going to do *anything*, Ro. I haven't even told him about Cynthia, yet. Relax. I'm not going to, I don't know, fucking *pounce* on him or anything. I do have some self-control."

Ro doubted that very much. She knew, just as well as he did, if he had the opportunity to pounce – he would, and without hesitation.

"I just don't want you to get hurt," she said softly.

"What happened to: 'getting hurt is a part of life'?" he asked, suddenly serious.

"Yeah, well, you getting hurt is different than Andy getting hurt," she countered.

"How so?"

Ro finally looked directly at him, genuinely worried. "Andy isn't my best friend. There's a difference."

Doni looked down, feeling the tiniest bit guilty. He knew Ro's heart was in the right place, but he had to make mistakes to learn from them. She couldn't keep him in a bubble for the rest of their lives.

"Thank you – for dealing with Erik," Doni grumbled, kicking at the floor. "I need to -"

"Talk to him," she finished for him. "Yeah. I know. Sooner rather than later. For all our sakes."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Andy grinned as he pulled up to the Tavern the following morning. Doni stood outside in a nice shirt and sunglasses, with a backpack slung over his shoulder. From the way he was standing, Andy was certain Doni had gotten little to no sleep.

"Morning, sunshine!" he greeted him as Doni got into the car.

"Morning," Doni grumbled.

"I don't think I've ever seen you in the daytime before," Andy noted. "You look nice."

"Thank you." Doni glanced at him, moving his glasses up to his hair. Andy was right. He looked downright exhausted. "This is usually my bedtime, so – know I don't do this kind of thing for just anybody."

Andy smirked. "You tryin' to say I'm special or something?"

Doni rolled his eyes. "We should get moving," he said, nodding at the dashboard. "If we want to be there by noon."

Andy stole one more glance in Doni's direction before shifting gears and pulling away from the bar. The first half hour of the drive was full of sleepy and awkward silence, accompanied by a plethora of late 90's hits pumping through the speakers. Andy quietly sang along – grinning when he noticed Doni chiming in for a few of them.

Once they'd stopped for breakfast and coffee, Doni woke up a little and the conversation flowed almost non-stop, about music and movies, and the places Doni hoped to be able to show Andy in the Valley. He ventured to talk about the different bars and clubs he and Ro liked to frequent, watching Andy's expression for any sign of interest in going. He was pleased to find that Andy appeared attentive and curious. This was a good sign. Maybe he'd be able to drag him out to one later.

It took them nearly four hours to make it to Del Luna Valley. Even only a few hours away, the temperature change made Andy turn up the air conditioning. He didn't want to sweat through his shirt before they got to the record studio. He hadn't packed a back-up. Only a t-shirt he planned to wear on the drive home.

"It's too early to check in," Andy said, glancing at the clock. "We should just go to the studio."

Doni nodded in agreement and watched as Andy pulled into a large parking lot. They told the parking attendant that they had a meeting with Reid Hanley, and the attendant confirmed Andy's name, before telling him he could park in the far back of the lot. They would have to walk quite a distance back to the building. Andy sighed; certain he was going to look like a mess by the time they made it inside.

"Holy crap," Andy said, eyeing the building anxiously as they finally made it to the front doors. "Would you look at this place?"

Doni, instead, stared at Andy. He watched as Andy swallowed and fidgeted, clearly gathering up his courage.

"You nervous?" Doni asked quietly.

"A little bit. Do I look okay?"

"You look great. Let me just…" Doni turned Andy to face him, fixing a couple of the buttons on Andy's shirt and smoothing out a few of the wrinkles as he spoke. "There. Much better. You're going to be fine. I'm going to be with you the whole time."

Andy didn't know how to express how thankful he was for this fact. He wouldn't have been able to do this on his own, and honestly, Cynthia would have made him even more nervous. She'd have a thousand questions and Andy probably wouldn't be able to get a word in.

"Name please?" the lady at the front desk asked as they approached her.

Andy tried to subtly wipe the sweat from his forehead. "Andy McLayne," he said.

“I’m supposed to be meeting -”

“Mr. McLayne!”

Andy barely had the chance to utter Reid’s name before the man came shouting across the lobby. He reached immediately to shake Andy’s hand, grimacing only a little at the sweat.

“I was a little worried you weren’t going to show up,” Reid continued. “And I see you brought your…” He eyed Doni suspiciously. “Partner?”

Both Andy and Doni turned red, stammering their denial in response. They even instinctively moved away from each other, but only a few inches.

“No, no,” Andy told him. “We’re just friends. This is Doni.”

Reid grimaced, less than enthusiastic about Doni’s presence. “Mm.” He nodded shortly. “We’ve met.”

Doni didn’t respond.

Reid eyed the two of them, his mouth open as he struggled to find a polite way to ask his next question. “So…” he started slowly. “You’re…not gay.”

Andy choked. “Excuse me?”

Reid shrugged. “I mean, it’s fine if you are,” he explained. “I just want to get everything out on the table now, so there are no surprises later on. You’re *not* gay, despite bringing your…*friend* along with you on this overnight trip.”

Doni wanted to fight back. He felt the need to defend Andy, even if it wasn’t something he really needed defending over. He could see the discomfort creep into Andy’s face as he, too, fought to find the right response.

“I…don’t like labels,” was the one Andy settled on.

Doni tried not to overthink this comment either. He would process it later, and possibly press Andy for an explanation, but for now, he remained stoic.

“Of course, you don’t.” Reid rolled his eyes and sighed, gesturing for Andy and Doni to follow him. “Come with me. We’re going to have you play for us a bit. I’ll show you the recording booths.”

They started down a long hallway, lined with red doors. Andy tried to read the names on the plaques beside each of them, but they were moving too quickly. Even with his long legs, Andy had trouble keeping up with Reid’s determined stride.

“Once the team has heard you live, we’re going to deliberate for a bit – you two can have some lunch in our cafeteria – and then we’ll come together and go over the details of an offer.” Reid glanced back at Andy over his shoulder. “That sound good to you?”

Andy nodded.

“So,” Reid said curiously. “If you two aren’t an item – do you have someone else at home I should know about?”

“Y-Yeah,” Andy said. “I have a girlfriend. Cynthia.”

Reid barked a laugh. “Not anymore, you don’t. Listen, the queer thing I can sell – it’s very hot to be a queer rockstar. Bowie, Mercury – you know. It’s not as taboo as it used to be – thank *God*. Makes my job, and my life, a lot easier. But the public doesn’t seem to vibe with a rocker who’s already tied down, you understand? They love the idea of potentially standing a chance of being with you. We’ll find you a model or two to hang out with, so we can throw the presses off the scent.”

This was all a bit too much for Andy to process. He wasn’t allowed to be with Cynthia – which would a huge dealbreaker – but they would insist he pretend to be dating some supermodels for the paparazzi? It didn’t make sense. He wouldn’t do that.

Doni grabbed Andy by the arm, pulling him back slightly. “Andy,” he said, concerned. “I don’t like this.”

“It’s okay,” Andy assured him – although he very much felt the same way.

Reid led them into a small recording booth and gestured around the room. “Here we are,” he said. “This is one of our more intimate rooms – usually for recording acoustic sets. I’ll need to go gather the others shortly, but there’s a door over there where you can go into the booth itself – play around with the instruments if you’d like.”

Andy looked around. He counted nearly eight guitars in the immediate vicinity. A desk littered with sound equipment sat in front of the massive booth window, accompanied by a few plush rolling chairs. In the back corner was a large black leather couch.

“If you decide to sign with us, this will be your new home, so get comfy,” Reid continued. “For full transparency, and don’t quote me on this, but I’m shooting for a two to

three album deal. To start out at least. Based on the success of those albums, we can talk about what comes next, but you've got to convince the rest of the team. I'm already on board."

No pressure then, Andy thought to himself.

"We'll also need you to move closer to the Valley, for starters, so we can have you close by."

Andy froze; unsure he heard Reid correctly. He would have to move to the Valley?

Reid laughed at the look on Andy's face and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry, kid," he said. "We'll help you find a place, and cover some of the finances – until you can pay it back. We're always happy to do this for up-and-coming artists."

"I – I don't know…" Andy said slowly, glancing at Doni, who looked just as concerned.

Reid dropped his hand. "I can tell you're going to need to think that part over a bit," he said. "No worries. I'll give you a little privacy while I go wrangle the others."

Reid left Andy and Doni alone in the booth, both stewing in silence as the weight of Andy's impending decisions washed over them. Andy finally turned to face Doni.

"I'd be…*crazy* not to take this deal," he said. "Right?"

Doni couldn't look at him. "I don't know…"

"Like," Andy thought out loud. "This is everything I've been working toward. I have to take it."

Doni shook his head. "I don't know about this guy, if I'm being honest. Something about this whole thing just feels…wrong."

"I think that might just be the industry," Andy replied, rubbing the back of his neck. "You know? Like, something about show business is always going to come off a little… sleazy."

Doni knew he was right, but it didn't calm his nerves at all. If Andy moved to the Valley, he would never see him again. He was sure of it. Maybe that would be for the best, but it still broke his heart to think about it.

"Four hours is a long way from Danville," Doni pointed out. "What's Cynthia going to think about all this?"

Doni didn't care what Cynthia thought about it, but he figured it might put a little hesitation in Andy's decision making.

"I don't know," Andy said honestly. "She just got this promotion at work. She won't want to leave."

Doni looked down. "And you won't have to do the open mics anymore," he added.

Andy finally paused; his attention focused solely on Doni. He was talking about the open mics, but Andy had a sinking feeling it wasn't about that at all.

They wouldn't see each other anymore. That's what Doni meant.

Andy smiled sadly. "You gonna miss me?" his voice was barely above a whisper as he moved closer to Doni.

Doni shook his head quickly, blinking back tears. "That's not what I said," he denied, adamantly looking away from Andy.

"But you were thinking it," Andy coaxed. "It's okay. I'm thinking it, too."

A few tense seconds passed before Doni dared to look up. His eyes were red, and Andy felt his stomach twist painfully. Thinking on his feet, Andy grabbed Doni by the hand and pulled him toward the couch, snagging a guitar from one of the stands along the way.

"What are you doing?"

"Have you ever played guitar before?" Andy asked, gesturing for Doni to take a seat.

"N-No," Doni replied, confused.

Andy sat down directly next to him, their thighs pressed firmly together. He handed over the guitar and Doni gawked at him – baffled.

"I'm going to teach you," Andy explained. "Here – put your fingers here like this."

He took Doni's left hand and helped position his fingers along the neck of the guitar. Doni felt his face grow warm as Andy then reached around him to help with his right hand.

"Don't mind me," Andy breathed, his mouth dangerously close to Doni's neck. Doni was immensely thankful for the large instrument covering his lap. "Is this okay?"

Doni could only make sounds. "Mhm."

Andy covered Doni's hand with his own and guided him into a gentle strum. Doni smiled, feeling the warmth spread from his lap to the rest of his body. He leaned back against

Andy, who moved even closer, his chin on Doni's shoulder.

They strummed for a few minutes, as Andy continued to talk Doni through his lesson. It didn't sound good at all - in fact none of the notes had even been remotely right - but Doni laughed, which lightened the mood. Andy felt a wave of relief, knowing he'd made Doni smile. Doni turned his face toward Andy and the guitar slid from his grip onto the floor.

"O-Oh, fuck!" he gasped, reaching for it.

"Don't worry," Andy said, still holding tight to both of Doni's hands. "It wasn't far. It should be fine."

They stared at each other, neither one moving from their spot. Doni wondered if Andy could hear how fast his heart was beating. He wanted to kiss him so badly. Pin him to the couch, beg him to stay, slide his hand into Andy's pants, and –

"Doni…" Andy mumbled – almost like a whimper.

Doni knew he had to say something. Whether it was a confession of love, or a confession of Cynthia's indiscretions – he had to say something before they crossed a line.

"Andy, I have to tell you something…"

The door behind them opened suddenly and Reid entered, followed by a few additional executives. Reid cleared his throat, his eyes wide and amused. Doni and Andy scrambled to their feet, hoping the executives hadn't noticed.

"Are we…interrupting something?" Reid teased.

"No, sir," Andy answered hastily. "Was just testing out some of the equipment."

Reid clearly didn't believe him. "Well, if you wouldn't mind popping into the booth, Mr. McLayne – we'd love to hear what you can do."

Andy nodded and avoided Doni's gaze as he passed through the door to the booth. The executives set up at the desk, not bothering to introduce themselves to Doni, who settled back down on the couch, huddling himself in a corner.

Andy played for what felt like hours, listening to feedback from the team and taking requests for more. Despite the fact that he was shaking the whole time, he kept Doni in his direct line of sight. Seeing him smile, supportively, from his corner of the room made all the difference.

After they were finished, they left Doni and Andy alone for a second time as they discussed the terms of a contract. As Andy's knee bobbed up and down anxiously, Doni placed his hand over it, giving a gentle squeeze. Andy leaned into him in thanks.

The contract meeting involved a lot of legal jargon Andy didn't really understand. Reid did his best to explain the outline of the two-album agreement in layman's terms, and Andy nodded along, but still found himself quite lost.

It sounded good to him though – from what he could understand. It promised him a good chunk of the royalties from his sales and outlined ownership of his intellectual property. It also outlined how they would front the costs of his moving and living expenses, until he made enough to start paying them back – which sounded fair and logical.

Andy should have waited to go over it with a lawyer – they even asked him if he wanted to, and Doni almost butt in to insist he think about it more – but Andy found himself terrified that the deal would go away if he walked out the door without signing it. He was so afraid of losing out, he was willing to risk whatever he might have missed in the fine print.

Reid popped a bottle of champagne in the office and toasted to Andy, who downed his glass in one go. Doni stayed close but didn't partake, keeping a glass in his hand so that Andy wouldn't notice.

"You're gonna do great things, kid," Reid said, throwing an arm around Andy's shoulders. "Great things, I tell ya."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Andy and Doni made their way to their motel after grabbing dinner with Reid. Doni remained silent for the duration of the meal, only smiling and nodding when he felt appropriate. The truth was, he wanted to disappear. He wanted to pull Andy into a back hallway and tell him they should leave – run off – go to a bar instead where they could talk about things more and maybe figure out if he was making a big mistake.

Or they could dance and make out under a bright pink disco ball – *anything* but listen to Reid go on for hours about how much money Andy could make.

But, no – Doni did not suggest going to a bar. He watched the excited look on Andy's face and knew he couldn't be the one to break his spirit this soon after making his dream come true. So, he remained quiet.

Andy had been under the impression, the way Reid had set it up, that they would be staying in some swanky city hotel close to the studio. Instead, they pulled up to a dingy, two-star motel, off the side of the highway. Andy double checked his information nearly four times before they ventured to the front desk – confirming that this was, indeed, where Reid intended to send them. Doni held his tongue, wanting to point out that this wasn't a good sign when it came to Reid's promises.

The room wasn't terrible, though, Doni had to admit. It at least smelled clean. They had fresh towels, and a television, and even a landline. And there were –

"Two beds."

The words slipped right out of Doni's mouth. He wasn't even sure he'd said them aloud, until Andy cast him a sideways glance.

"You almost sound disappointed," he said. "What? Did you want to cuddle or something?"

Doni caught himself, shaking his head quickly. "Pfft, you couldn't handle cuddling with me," he said, trying to play it cool. "It would be game over for you, Mr. I'm-Not-Into-Labels."

Andy grinned, unable to hold back. "Are you volunteering to be my queer awakening, *Adonis?"*

Doni's jaw dropped at the mention of his full name. He had no idea Andy knew it. No one called him Adonis except his dad.

"Who told you?" Doni demanded, moving closer to Andy.

Andy shook his head. "I'm not tellin'…" he taunted, his grin growing wider.

"Was it Ro? I swear to God, as soon as we get back, I am gonna -"

Andy tossed his head back in a laugh. "Calm down, calm down!" he said. "I stalked your Instagram like a normal person. Took me a second to figure out your username, but I got it eventually."

Doni's expression suddenly went stark. "Y-You did?" he asked, nervously.

"Are you mad?"

Doni wasn't mad, no. But he had some things on his page he didn't know if he wanted Andy to see.

"No," he admitted. "I'm a little embarrassed, though. S-See anything you like?"

Andy moved toward the bed on the far side of the room, shrugging a little. "Oh, nothing too crazy. Just some photos of you by the pool…" he glanced back at Doni, giving him a wink. "Nice piercings."

"Oh, Jesus! Fuck – Andy!" Doni wanted to melt right into the moldy carpet. He would live forever among the silverfish.

Andy sat down on the bed, thoroughly enjoying himself. "Hey, I didn't say I was complaining. They're pretty fuckin' hot."

Doni's brain stopped working entirely. Andy did *not* just say that his nipple

piercings were hot. Doni had half a mind to do a little striptease for him, just to see what he would do. He would have, if he was not still actively dying of embarrassment.

"Talk about a queer awakening," Doni shot back at him, trying to regain his ground. "Should we share your little interest with Cynthia, maybe?"

Andy's smile faded. "Ah," he said. "No. No, we should not." He cleared his throat. "Speaking of – I should probably give her a call. Let her know I made it here okay. I don't think I'm going to tell her about the deal just yet. I think that would probably be better to tell her in person."

Doni did not agree nor disagree. He dropped his bag by the bed closest to the door and pulled out his phone and pack of cigarettes.

"I'll uh…" he said, glancing at the door. "I'll give you some privacy. I'm gonna go out for a smoke."

Andy frowned. "I wish you'd quit."

Doni didn't look at him. "I know."

Without another word, Doni stepped outside onto the deck area in front of their room. His lighter clicked and sparked, and he inhaled deeply, thankful for the rush of smoke and nicotine coursing through him. He knew it was a bad habit, but it made him feel calmer.

He glanced down at his phone and scowled, noticing another missed call and voicemail on his screen. With a drag from his cigarette and a heavy sigh, he clicked on the message and Erik's voice sounded out into the night.

"H-Hey, sorry for all the voicemails, but you scared the shit out of me, babe. Hanging up like that wasn't cool, okay? I just want to know that you're alright." There was a long pause. "Shelly wants to know if you're still coming to her baby shower on Saturday. I know Ro's got that party or whatever at the bar later that night, but – you missed Dave's birthday already and everyone is asking about you. They're just…worried. And I don't know what to tell them anymore."

Doni frowned. He missed his friends. Breakups were naturally nasty and difficult when it came to dividing up friendships, but they had committed to being cool if they had to be around each other. They didn't want their people to pick sides.

So, Doni did it for them. And disappeared.

"Look, Doni," Erik's voicemail continued with a sigh. "We agreed to keep things… normal. And I talked to Ro earlier, and she said you were away this weekend. I don't need to know who you're with or what you're doing, but I do need to know that you're safe. You can't just keep calling me out of the blue and not expect me to – to…I don't know." Another long pause. "J-Just call me, okay? Or call Shelly – God, I don't even care who at this point. Whoever you feel safe talking to. I love you."

Erik made a sound of immediate panic and regret – Doni could almost hear him pacing in the background of the message.

"Fuck. Shit. N-No. Pretend I didn't say that last part. Y-You know what – c-call Shelly. Okay, bye, Doni."

The message ended and Doni's finger hovered over Erik's name. He could call him back – he *should* call him back. He didn't want anyone to worry about him, but things never ended well whenever he and Erik reconnected. The feelings were still too fresh, and they were both still so lonely. It was a bad combination.

Doni's phone buzzed, interrupting his thoughts, and a notification popped up on his screen.

You can come back in.

He took a final drag from his cigarette before turning and carefully opening the door to their room. Andy had changed at some point during his phone call, now wearing sweatpants and an old t-shirt. Doni tried not to pay attention to how the sweatpants hugged his waist, focusing instead on the TV.

"How's Cynthia?" he asked, clearing his throat.

Andy looked surprised – Doni never wanted to talk about Cynthia. "She's…She's good. Uh, I think she's working on a piece. Didn't want to talk long."

"Did you tell her?" Doni crossed to his bed, reaching for his bag and pulling out a change of clothes. A David Bowie shirt – Doni felt himself grow warm, almost embarrassed.

Is it possible to be any gayer than you already are, Adonis?

"About the deal?"

"Y-Yeah," Doni tried to keep his voice steady.

He turned away from Andy and tugged his pants off. He prayed Andy would stay focused on the TV screen until he was fully dressed again.

It was best that he had looked away, because if he had any idea that Andy was watching him undress, he would not have been able to control how his dick reacted.

But Andy was – *watching*, that is – his mouth going dry as Doni pulled his shirt over his head – exposing the muscled shoulders Andy caught himself staring at far too often whenever Doni wore tank tops to work. Andy had been an athlete – he appreciated the amount of work that probably went into maintaining that physique. Doni must have worked out. Andy respected that.

That…and the tiny pair of underwear that hugged every curve of Doni's perfect ass. *Jesus fucking Christ*, Andy thought, his hand immediately falling to palm the growing problem in his crotch. Doni turned sideways and Andy might have let out a tiny whimper – he wasn't quite sure. He could see the outline of Doni's cock pressed against the fabric – and his mind flew back to the photo of Doni by the pool.

As Doni pulled on a pair of athletic shorts, he turned around. Andy snapped his attention back to the TV, tugging the blanket over his lap just enough to stay discreet.

"Andy?" Doni prompted, still awaiting an answer.

"Hm?" Andy pretended to be interested in the documentary playing on the screen. For a moment, he did genuinely forget what the question was.

"Did you tell Cynthia about the deal?"

"Oh," Andy looked down, chewing on his bottom lip. "N-No, I didn't tell her yet. I figured I should tell her in person."

Doni nodded in agreement. He shifted uncomfortably and moved toward his bed. He needed to text Ro – he needed to tell her that there were, in fact, two beds, and that she could rest easy knowing that there was zero chance any sex would happen between the two of them tonight.

Andy reached down for his bag, pulling out the snacks they'd snagged on their way to the motel. He popped a few chips in his mouth before speaking again.

"She's been weird lately," he commented.

Doni looked up from his phone. "Who?"

"Cynthia," Andy continued. "Distant. I know she's going to be pissed about moving, but I did the right thing, right? Like, I'd be stupid not to take this deal?"

Doni frowned, still refusing to answer that question no matter how many times Andy asked it. "Would you move without her?"

Andy's stomach turned and he nearly crushed the bag of chips in his hands. "I don't know," he admitted. "I mean, probably. But we've never done long-distance before. I don't think our relationship would survive that."

Doni wanted to ask the question he'd been wondering for ages – since before he'd even seen Cynthia and that reporter guy making out. Was there even a smidgen of doubt in Andy's heart about his relationship? Would he ever consider ending it? Even if he *knew* what was happening?

"Would you break up with her?" he didn't look at Andy when he asked, afraid he'd overstepped, but desperate to know.

Andy's expression fell. "I don't want to do that."

"R-Right," Doni said. He should have known. Andy was in love with Cynthia. That was just a fact. Ro was right.

Andy peered over at him, holding out the bag of chips. "You want some of these?"

Doni nodded, reaching out for them, but falling just a couple inches short. Andy laughed as Doni tried leaning closer, almost tumbling off the bed.

"Don't be an asshole!" Doni said, nearly faceplanting into the mattress. "Just toss 'em over here!"

"Why don't you come sit with me?" Andy suggested. "Then we could just share."

Doni looked up. The look on his face must have resembled that of absolute terror, because Andy laughed again, shaking his head.

"I don't have cooties," Andy said. "Come on. Sit with me. We'll watch something."

Doni swallowed and debated telling Andy he was just going to try to get some sleep, but before he knew it, he was swinging his legs off the side of the bed and Andy was scooting

over on his – allowing room for Doni to sit down next to him.

Doni's heart nearly leapt out of his chest when Andy leaned back against the headboard, lifting his right arm to rest behind his head. He held the bag of chips out again and Doni snagged a few, trying his best to mimic Andy's relaxed state, but finding it nearly impossible to do so. They'd never been in such a casual and vulnerable state with each other before. It was…nice.

"Who were you talking to?" Andy asked abruptly.

Doni nearly choked on a chip. "W-What?"

"I heard you," Andy tilted his head to glance at him sideways. "Outside, when you were having a smoke. I heard another voice. It sounded like you were on the phone. Were you talking to Ro?"

"Oh!" Doni wasn't prepared to tell Andy about Erik but didn't know how much Andy heard. It would be worse for him in the long run if he lied. "I was listening to a voicemail. F-From my…ex-boyfriend."

Andy's brow furrowed in confusion. "Why was he calling you?"

Doni brought his knees up to his chest and hugged them tight. He didn't know what to tell Andy. The whole thing was messy. "It's…complicated," he said.

Andy sat up a little, his hand landing on the mattress just behind Doni. Doni felt a shudder run up his spine, and he wanted Andy to pull him into a hug.

He needed a hug. Badly.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Andy asked, dropping his voice low. Andy couldn't help but wonder if this was the boyfriend he'd seen kissing Doni at the Tavern ages ago. He hadn't seen him around since – it would make sense if they broke up. But did that mean Doni was single?

Andy shook his head, as if trying to literally erase the thought from his head. It didn't matter whether Doni was single or not. It was none of Andy's business.

"N-No," Doni whimpered. "Not really."

"Okay," Andy replied, awkwardly. He wanted to do *something* to offer Doni any semblance of comfort, but he was never very good with this kind of thing. His hand moved from the mattress to Doni's back where he rubbed the space between his shoulder blades comfortingly. Doni drew a deep breath and rested his head on his knees, losing himself in the feeling. For a moment, all thoughts of Erik vanished, and Doni's shoulders relaxed.

In fact, his whole body relaxed.

"I'm sorry for asking," Andy said quietly.

Doni shook his head. "Don't be," he mumbled. "I'm sorry for bringing the mood down."

"You want to watch something? I – I think I saw *National Treasure* was on one of the channels."

Doni did want to watch something. He stayed in his curled-up position for a good portion of the movie before he felt his eyelids getting heavy. When Andy sank down into the pillows, Doni did the same, knowing he would have to move back to his own bed before he fell asleep.

"Doni?"

"Mm?"

"T-Thank you," Andy said. "For coming along with me on this. I – I know we're not like – I mean, I know we're not close or anything, but -"

"We're not strangers, Andy," Doni pointed out, his eyes closed. He was going to pass out soon. In Andy's bed. "We're friends."

Andy nodded. "Y-Yeah, that's uh – that's what I was going to say," he explained. "I know this sounds dumb, but Doni, I – I think you're my *best* friend."

Doni's eyes opened and he was surprised to see Andy staring at him from only a few inches away. If Andy were single, and if Doni knew for certain that Andy had any interest in men at all – he would have gone for it in that moment. He would have taken Andy's face in his hands and kissed him desperately. He would have taken all his clothes off and given him everything he'd dreamt about for months now.

But instead, with the most sincerity he could muster, Doni said: "It's not dumb."

Andy's mouth twitched upward into a soft smile, and he closed his eyes. Doni knew he should move, but he didn't. He allowed himself a few deep breaths before sleep washed over him.

Awoken by the sound of loud ending credits nearly an hour later, Andy lifted his head, surprised to see Doni snoring next to him. He thought about moving to Doni's bed, giving him space, or even carrying him over to his side – but instead, decided to leave him where he was. They were two grown men – two *best* friends, as they had just established - they could share a bed platonically and it would be fine.

Best friends could also stare at each other and count the freckles along the bridge of their nose. They could follow the curve of every curl on their head and listen to the gentle sounds of their breathing while they dreamed. This was normal, Andy reasoned with himself. He could admire his best friend without it meaning anything more.

Andy reached out, his thumb brushing along Doni's cheek gently. Best friends could do this too, right? They could be tender with each other. Gentle. Comforting.

"Good night, Doni," Andy whispered.

In that moment, Andy could have sworn Doni smiled in his sleep. It was enough to calm Andy's nerves about the record deal and his impending conversation with Cynthia about moving to Del Luna – and with a soft sigh, he allowed himself to rest.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Doni groaned in his sleep, stirring slightly as he felt a hand caress the side of his leg, sliding up the fabric of his shorts. He clenched his eyes closed, turning his head to bury it in his pillow. He wasn't in the mood.

"Erik," he moaned softly. "Stop. I'm tired."

A pair of lips pressed against his neck and Doni leaned back a little. He was tired, but okay - *maybe* he could be swayed. His neck was his sweet spot. Erik knew that.

"Not Erik, babe," a low, familiar voice rumbled in his ear.

Doni's eyes shot open. "Andy?!"

Andy nodded and tightened his hold around Doni's waist, pulling him closer. Doni's heart nearly thundered out of his chest as he tried to keep his cool, his cock swelling as Andy's hands moved dangerously close. This couldn't possibly be happening – it had to be a dream.

Oh, but what a nice dream, Doni thought as Andy's fingers dipped into his waistband. He gasped, his whole body shuddering, as Andy grabbed him, stroking him gently.

"This okay?" Andy asked between kisses, his tongue gently brushing against Doni's ear.

"Mhmm," Doni whimpered, rolling onto his back.

"It was killing me not being able to touch you today. Was it killing you, too?" Andy pressed his forehead to Doni's, their noses brushing against each other.

Doni nodded, succumbing to whatever fantasy this was. He stared at Andy, confused and aroused, searching for some kind of explanation, but Andy didn't provide one. Instead, he rested his elbow next to Doni's head, hovering above him for only a moment before he dipped down to kiss him.

Electricity exploded through Doni's body, and he thought for a second he would cum immediately. Andy's lips were soft but desperate, causing Doni to reach up, taking Andy's face in his hands. His fingers curled through Andy's hair, pulling him in deeper, giving the locks a sharp tug. Andy grinned and paused to catch his breath while he continued working Doni's cock, Doni's hips lurching upward eagerly.

"You want this, too, right?" Andy asked, his voice laced with desire and lust. "I'm not crazy?"

Doni nodded vigorously. He couldn't bring himself to speak, so instead he pulled Andy's lips back to his, his tongue begging for entrance to Andy's mouth. With a pleased moan, Andy obliged, sliding his tongue against Doni's.

Andy stopped stroking and focused his attention on removing Doni's clothes. Doni watched, his lips slightly parted, as Andy undressed him – casting his clothing aside, and following suit with his own. Doni blushed furiously over his now fully exposed erection – embarrassed by how quickly Andy got him there, and how urgently he needed to feel release.

Patting the side of Doni's thigh, Andy whispered: "Turn over, baby."

Doni did as he was told without hesitation. Andy arched over him, placing kisses along his spine. Doni released a loud, unhinged moan as Andy spread Doni out, his tongue eagerly preparing him.

How did Andy know how to do this? And how the hell is he so fucking good at it?

Surely, Doni thought, Andy had never been with a man before. It would have come up in conversation. There would have been *signs*, right? But there he was, his face buried in Doni's ass, eagerly devouring it as if it were a four-course meal.

Andy's hands moved to Doni's hips and Doni felt the familiar pressure he'd been anxiously waiting for. With a nod of approval from Doni, Andy slid into him slowly, taking a moment to adjust his legs, before pulling out just a bit.

"A-Andy, p-please…" Doni begged. He needed him. He needed him *so badly*.

With a sharp thrust, Andy buried himself once again inside Doni, throwing his head back as guttural moans coursed through him. Doni gripped at the sheets, growing impatient. He threw himself back at Andy, who nearly doubled over, his breathing growing shallow.

"I-Is that how you like it?" Andy asked. He leaned forward, pressing his lips once again to Doni's ear. "You want to be fucked hard, babe?" He gave Doni's ass a small playful spank.

"Y-Yes!" Doni cried out, reaching down to stroke himself. "God. Fuck. Andy - *please*!"

Andy picked up his pace, holding Doni tight. The mattress springs squeaked loudly as the headboard thudded against the wall. Doni felt bad for whoever was in the room next to them, because he lacked any and all ability to be even remotely quiet.

Andy was almost too good to be true. He maintained a steady rhythm, beaming with every cry from Doni's mouth. Doni writhed underneath him, back arching, neck-craned - knowing he could, and probably would, explode at any minute. The sheets under him were already a mess.

"D-Doni?" Andy panted.

"Mmf?" Doni could no longer form words, let alone full sentences.

"I – I want you on top," Andy instructed. "R-Ride me? Please?"

Doni would do just about anything Andy asked him to, if he was being honest. Andy laid back and Doni straddled him, taking a moment to return the favor and jerk him off. Andy bit his lip, trying to suppress the low growl brewing in his throat. Doni knew he could push Andy over the edge just like this – but he had requested a ride, so Doni aligned himself and slid back down into place, slowly. He rocked his hips forward and he felt Andy twitch, his eyes rolling back as his mouth hung open.

"Oh God, yes, baby…" he panted. "J-Just like that. Oh my God, I'm gonna cum. D-Don't stop."

Doni could feel himself getting closer. He alternated between bouncing and rolling, completely unaware of the sounds he was making – their voices no longer distinguishable. Instead, he focused on the look on Andy's face. Adoration. Pleasure. Hunger. Doni felt a burst of pride knowing he was the cause of all of that. He wanted to be the only one responsible for that look. Cynthia didn't get to see this face – not like this at least – he was sure of it.

Andy bucked upward, and Doni fell onto Andy's chest, losing his balance. Andy took this opportunity to hold Doni's hips tight, lifting him up as he thrusted. Whimpering wildly, Doni crushed his mouth to Andy's, half kissing him, half panting words of longing.

"P-Pick me," he begged, holding Andy's face. He clenched his eyes shut tight, savoring the depth of Andy's cock as it struck his prostate, sending full body shivers through him. "Oh, f-fuuuuck, Andy. Please. I w-want you. O-Only you."

"Doni…" Andy moaned, rubbing his sweat-soaked face against Doni's. He was close, too - his voice husky and haggard. "F-Fuck, Doni…"

"Cum, baby…" Doni coaxed, his voice a desperate whine. "Fucking cum for me…"

"Doni…" Andy continued to breathe heavily, his eyes locked onto Doni's. "Y-Yes, oh god, I'm – D-Doni!"

Doni's shaft pressed hard against Andy's stomach, the friction of Andy's movements causing the pressure to grow to an unbearable level. As Andy threw his head back, he cried out a final time –

"YO, DONI. WAKE UP."

Doni nearly fell out of bed as he awoke with a start. He sat up quickly, scrambling to take in his surroundings. He was in Andy's bed – he'd fallen asleep in Andy's bed. And they had just –

No. They hadn't. It was a dream.

Horribly aware of the growing problem aching in his shorts, Doni gathered the blankets quickly in his lap. At the end of the bed, Andy stood with nothing but a towel around his waist, chuckling.

"Rise and shine, Sleeping Beauty," he said.

"W-What happened?" Doni asked groggily, rubbing his eyes. He did his best not to look at Andy's exposed body – especially at the way the towel barely clung to his slender hips.

"You overslept," Andy told him, casting a dangerous grin. "Sounded like you were having quite the dream, though. I felt bad interrupting."

Doni's whole body was on fire. Andy had no idea. How was it possible that this

dream had been hotter than any of the actual, real live sex he'd had in months? It was embarrassing.

"Check out is in an hour," Andy changed the subject. "If you want to shower before we leave, I'd hop in there now. I figure we can grab some food on the way home. Find a diner or something."

"Y-Yeah," Doni agreed. "S-Sounds good."

As Andy turned to pull some clothes out of his bag, Doni took the opportunity to bolt for the bathroom door, his hands covering his lingering excitement.

"Sorry it's already steamy in there!" Andy called after him.

"It's okay!" Doni yelled back, letting the door slam.

Shaking, Doni undressed and stepped into shower, feeling his muscles relax almost instantly under the hot water. He ran his hands through his hair and heaved a sigh, dropping a single hand down to touch himself. As he tilted his head backward, mouth open wide, he prayed that the sound of the water drowned out the stream of moans and cursing coming from his parted lips.

"F-Fuck…" he panted. "Andy…o-oh God…"

The small bathroom echoed, but Doni didn't seem to notice. It didn't take long for him to finish, causing him to double over. He rested his forehead against the cool tile, catching his breath before he finished washing up. Once out, he shook the water from his curls and rubbed away a spot of steam and condensation from the mirror over the sink. For several minutes he stared at his reflection, shame and guilt washing over him.

What are you doing, Doni? He asked himself. *Maybe Ro was right. Maybe this was a bad idea.*

Doni realized he'd forgotten to grab a change of clothes from his bag and sighed. He wrapped a towel around his waist and cracked the door open slightly.

"H-Hey, Andy?"

Andy, now fully dressed, looked up from his spot on the bed.

"Can you bring me my bag?"

Andy stood and nodded. "No reason to be shy," he commented, snagging the bag. "I've seen you with your shirt off before."

Doni's cheeks turned red. "I know, I know," he said. "Mr. Instagram Stalker. Just give me my bag."

Andy held it just out of reach, tauntingly. "Everything okay in there? You sounded like you were having a…*hard* time."

Doni felt like he was going to die on the spot. His fears had been confirmed. Andy had probably heard his solo session – he probably heard Doni moan his name as he came. He probably heard everything, and yet –

Andy didn't seem bothered by it. In fact, he was smiling, and Doni could detect the slightest hint of pink in his cheeks. Maybe Andy had been *into* it. If Andy were a random guy from a bar, Doni would have had the balls to ask him directly – in fact, he would have marched into the room butt naked, on parade just to tease him. But Andy wasn't a random guy from the bar, so Doni remained partially hidden by the door, one hand holding the towel up, and the other outstretched for his bag.

"A-Andy, please…"

Andy conceded and moved toward the door, handing the bag over. Andy would be lying if he said he didn't sneak a peek, his eyes falling to the V shape of Doni's hips. He looked away quickly, rubbing the back of his neck.

"No rush – b-but, I'll be ready when you are."

Doni nodded and dressed quickly, returning to the room. They shared minimal conversation as they made their way to the front desk to check out, and then into Andy's car. The drive home wouldn't take more than a few hours, but Andy wasn't quite ready for their weekend to end.

The tension between them ebbed over breakfast, though Doni noticed Andy making more eye contact than usual. They talked about movies and music – again – and how Andy would decorate his new apartment in the Valley. Doni offered to help shop for furniture and Andy didn't protest – nor did he take into consideration that Cynthia would have some say in the décor.

When they finished, they decided to take a short walk downtown, staring at the tall buildings, and taking notes of different cafes and restaurants that they would have to try out,

eventually.

"You and Ro have to come visit me," Andy insisted. "I'm going to be lost without you guys."

"You'll forget about us," Doni rolled his eyes. "I give it two weeks, and you'll be too important to ever talk to us again."

He waited for Andy to laugh – but he didn't. Instead, he frowned and looked at his feet. "That's not true," he said. "We'll stay in touch, r-right?"

Doni felt his heart sink. He had been half kidding. While he and Ro made their way into the city often, once Andy was a big star he would find it hard to believe he would make time to see them. He would make new friends, go to big important parties, and walk red carpets, go on tour – all the things budding young stars were expected to participate in.

Doni would disappear from his life eventually, and at that moment, both boys were actively fighting to not let that fact destroy them.

"L-Let me take a picture of you," Doni cut through the silence, changing the subject.

Andy looked confused and Doni rubbed his arm.

"Let's document this," he said. "In less than a few months, this will be your home."

Andy posed awkwardly with a street sign, trying his best – and failing miserably – to look cool. Doni smiled at the photo and shook his head, giving Andy a little direction. The next photo was perfect – Andy looking off into the distance, his hand settled lazily at the base of his neck. Doni loved the photo so much, he had half a mind to make it the background on his phone – if he could get away with it.

"My turn!" Andy said, bounding toward him, relieved to be done modeling. "Get over there!"

They switched places and Doni shoved both his hands in his pockets, looking effortlessly fabulous. Andy took too many photos, shaking his head in envy.

"It's not even fair how pretty you are," he commented, reviewing the photos. "Like, holy shit you look good. That shirt is really hot on you."

Doni's mouth went dry. He wasn't sure he'd heard Andy correctly, and even less sure when the next sentence came out of his mouth.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get a selfie."

Doni tried to keep his composure as Andy slid an arm around his shoulders, pulling him in close. As Andy started to make funny faces and peace signs, Doni relaxed a little, sticking his tongue out. They laughed and Andy snapped what felt like a hundred photos before he scrolled back through them, a stupid smile crossing his face. Doni waited for the final judgement.

"Are they okay?" he asked when Andy remained silent. "We look good?"

Andy nodded, chewing on the corner of his lip. "Yeah, we look…" he swallowed. "We look really good. I mean, *you* do, at least. I'm a hot mess."

"How are you going to survive this Valley heat?"

"I'll have to get a place with a pool," Andy suggested, definitely not imagining Doni lounging next to it in a speedo or anything. "I'll be able to afford it eventually."

"As long as I'm allowed to come hang out in it," Doni eyed him, carefully. He meant it as a joke, but he hoped Andy would be up for it.

"Of course," he replied, his eyes still glued to the screen.

Doni reached out. "Let me see."

Andy turned the phone in Doni's direction, and his heart did an acrobatics routine. Andy had been staring at a very normal photo of the two of them, their heads leaned slightly together. The Doni in the photo was blushing – there was no denying it, and Andy's smile was warm and sincere. For a moment, it felt real, and Doni felt tears prick his eyelashes.

"W-We're cute," he commented, turning away quickly before Andy could notice. "Y-You should send that to me."

Andy watched as Doni headed back toward the car, trying to figure out why his heart was beating so fast.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Nearly an hour out from home, Andy heard a soft snoring coming from the passenger seat. He glanced over, seeing Doni slumped against the window, his mouth slightly open as he snoozed. Andy smiled, gently tapping the brake to avoid hitting an upcoming pothole too hard.

He knew Doni hadn't slept well, so he let him rest, keeping his singing to a minimum as he drove. He thought about the record deal and what it would mean to live in the city. He'd never lived anywhere too populated before and wondered if he'd be overwhelmed by the chaos of downtown Del Luna. Maybe he could find an apartment just outside of the Valley. But then he'd have to deal with a daily commute and traffic, and that felt extremely stressful.

He wondered if Cynthia would be more open to the idea of moving than he thought she would. Maybe she'd be excited for the bigger opportunities she could have in the city. And if she wasn't, certainly she would understand the gravity of this offer – and be willing to make sacrifices for something this huge.

But if she didn't – Andy frowned. If she didn't want to go with him. If she refused to leave Danville, and her new position – would they do long distance? Would that be sustainable? Or would he consider ending their relationship?

He shook his head, tapping the steering wheel anxiously. He hated that he was even considering it. It meant that he already had his answer.

Even if he didn't want to – he would be willing to sacrifice his relationship for this.

As they entered back into town, Andy knew he would have to wake Doni up.

"Hey," he said, reaching over to shake Doni's leg.

Doni woke abruptly, sitting up straight in his seat. He looked around, confused, before he remembered where he was. Rubbing his eyes sleepily, he stretched – reaching an arm out behind Andy's headrest.

"We almost there?" he asked, pushing through a yawn.

"Getting there," Andy said. "You need to tell me where you live. I'm not sure where I'm going."

Doni dropped his arms, glancing out the window. "You can just drop me off at the Tavern," he said quickly. "I need to talk to Ro about something anyway."

"Are you sure? I don't mind."

"Nah, it's okay," Doni replied. He didn't want Andy to see where he lived. It wasn't the best neighborhood, but it was what Doni could afford, especially now that he lived by himself.

Andy pulled up in front of the Tavern and Doni got out, grabbing his backpack from the back seat. He looked up, surprised to see Andy climbing out of his side, jogging around the car to meet him.

They'd hugged multiple times now, and yet, every single time, Doni felt his heart leap into his throat. Andy held him tight, keeping his voice low.

"Thank you," he mumbled. "Again. I couldn't have done this without you."

"Of course," Doni replied, returning the embrace. "I…am happy for you."

Andy pulled away. "You don't have to lie to me," he said. "But I appreciate you. Now I've got to go home and deal with all this mess." He bit his lip, hesitantly. "Hey – are you working later? I might need to come by for a drink."

Doni frowned. "No," he said. "B-But, if you end up needing a drink I'd be happy to join you. You have my number now. C-Call me."

Andy nodded. As he got back into his car, Doni made his way toward the Tavern. He couldn't help but smile – thinking about what Andy had said, and how he'd held him. He thought about his hand on Doni's knee, and the stolen glances over breakfast. He couldn't

have been imagining all of it, he was sure. But he was still getting ahead of himself.

He barely made it through the door before Ro's voice sounded from behind the bar.

"I don't like that look on your face," she said loudly. "What did you do?"

Doni came to a halt, surprised by the sudden verbal attack. "Nothing," he insisted, thankful for the dim lighting. From her distance, she couldn't see him blushing. "I didn't do anything."

"Bullshit," Ro accused. "I know that look. Please tell me there were two beds."

"There were two beds!" Doni said, honestly. "I mean – not that we *used* both of them, but there were definitely two."

"What does *that* mean?!" Ro yelped.

Doni laughed a little. "I'm just messin' with you, Ro. Chill. We didn't do anything. We fell asleep in the same bed, but there was plenty of room between us. We hugged. Nothing more."

Ro narrowed her eyes, not buying it.

"And, he said I was his best friend," Doni added, mostly under his breath.

"Best friend?!" Ro looked at him incredulously. "Doni…"

"Just let me have this, Ro!" Doni finally moved toward the bar, settling down on a stool. "Let me just ride this high for like five more minutes, okay? I need this."

Ro placed her hands on her hips. "Did you at least tell him about Cynthia?"

"No." Doni looked down at his hands in his lap. "But something tells me I'm not going to have to."

Ro looked confused. "Oh? Trouble in paradise?"

"Well, *obviously*," Doni pointed out. "But on top of that, he got an offer from the record company. Signed the deal and everything. I don't think it was a good idea, but there's no stopping him now. They want him to move to Del Luna, but Cynthia just got a promotion, so she won't want to move. Especially if she has additional reasons to stay here."

Ro's brow furrowed. "Move?" she asked. "Forget Cynthia – how do *you* feel about that?"

Doni sighed, wringing his hands together. He had spent most of the day thinking about it, and he still didn't have an answer even just for himself. He didn't have to say a word though – his expression told Ro everything she needed to know.

He didn't want Andy to move, but he'd deal with it if, and when, it happened.

Cynthia squealed as Andy walked through the door, throwing her arms around his waist before he could even take his shoes off.

"There you are!" she said excitedly. "I was wondering when you'd be home. You didn't answer any of my texts!"

It was true. Andy saw several messages come through from Cynthia, but he'd ignored them. He was anxious about her asking questions he didn't want to answer while he was driving.

"H-Hey!" He awkwardly hugged her back. "S-Sorry, I meant to respond, but I was driving."

Cynthia didn't seem to care. She stood on her tiptoes, reaching up for a kiss. Andy tensed up the moment her lips touched his. He hoped she wouldn't notice, but as she stepped back, frowning, he knew he was busted.

"Is…everything okay?" she asked.

Andy rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm fine," he said. "I promise. Uh, actually - I'm *more* than fine."

Cynthia tilted her head, curiously.

"Can we sit?" Andy asked.

"You are making me nervous."

"Cyn, please, just trust me. This is mostly a good thing. Let's sit down."

He guided her back to the couch where she kept her distance, sitting with her back against the arm. Andy took a few deep breaths before diving into his big news.

"So, I went to Axis," he told her. "Which you know. I met with that guy – Reid Hanley – and he offered me a contract. Starting in like two months."

Cynthia's eyes lit up with excitement. "Andy!" she shrieked. "That's incredible!"

Andy nodded, thrilled that she seemed to be on board so far. "Yeah!" he agreed. "It's amazing. I still can't believe it."

"Do you have a copy of the contract?" Cynthia pressed, moving a little closer to him. He should have known she would dive into investigator-mode. She would have a million and a half questions, and Andy knew he could probably only answer maybe four. "We should probably see if we can get a lawyer to look it over. It won't be cheap, but I can ask around at work -"

"We already went over the contract at the studio," Andy explained. "Don't worry. It seemed normal. To my knowledge at least. There's just…one thing."

Cynthia exhaled. "What is it?"

"I…have to move to Del Luna."

There was a heavy pause before Cynthia shook her head. "Why?" she asked.

"Since I'm new, they want to make sure I'm close by. It'll be easier for me to go back and forth to the studio, which will be a lot at first."

Cynthia didn't look convinced. "But it's only like…four hours away. Couldn't you just -"

"It's part of the contract, Cyn," Andy protested. "I *have* to relocate."

"Well, that's not happening," she snapped.

Andy stared at her. This was the response he was waiting for. He could feel the argument coming on.

"I just got promoted, Andy. I have my *dream* job," she said. "I'm not moving. I worked way too hard for this."

"Yeah, well, so have I!" Andy pointed out. It wasn't fair – for either of them. One of them would be losing out on something they loved no matter what they decided.

Cynthia was more logical than Andy though. She immediately started to solve the problem. "Ask them if they could put you up in a hotel or something whenever you need to record. You could go there for like a week or so at a time but then live here whenever you're not recording. They can't possibly expect you to uproot your whole life on such short notice!"

"I can't," Andy said, softly.

"Yes, you can!"

"No, Cyn," Andy looked away from her. "I can't, because I already signed the contract."

Cynthia's face went rigid. "You did…what?"

"I already signed," Andy repeated. "I'm going to Del Luna. I'm doing this."

Cynthia stood, suddenly. She marched into the kitchen, pacing back and forth – visibly fuming. She didn't say a word until she erupted with a loud:

"FUCK, ANDY."

Andy buried his face in his hands. He didn't know what to say that didn't make him sound like a complete asshole. He was being selfish – he knew he was being selfish, but he wasn't the only one.

"I'm not going to make you come with me," he mumbled into his hands.

Cynthia stared at him in disbelief, both frustrated and hurt by this. "Well, then what does that mean for us, Andy? We're just…done?"

Andy shook his head, finally getting to his feet. "Not necessarily," he said. "We could try long distance. A lot of couples do it. It's not that far, like you said. We can visit whenever we have free time."

"With what money, Andy?" Cynthia asked. "I'm basically carrying us here, and with you gone, I don't think I'll be able to afford this place on my own – even with my new position."

Andy knew she was right about that part. They were barely getting by as is, and even though he was sure her new role would come with a pay increase, she still needed whatever Andy brought home to pay for the utilities. She couldn't do it alone.

"I'll have money from the record deal, eventually – I'll bring you out to the city to visit," he reasoned, crossing the room to her. "It'll only suck for a few months, and then I can send you money to help cover rent, and -"

"Andy," Cynthia said, looking up at him – her eyes tired and sad.

Andy gripped her shoulders. It was the first time since signing the contract that he was afraid he might lose her. "We can make this work, babe," he reassured her.

Cynthia didn't want to look at him. She felt defeated. If they had approached this together, logically, they could have come up with a plan. But trying to tackle this reactively wasn't how she operated. She didn't do well with this kind of pressure.

"I just wish you had brought me with you," she said. "We could have talked about this. Brought a lawyer in. Before you signed anything. I don't know why you decided to make this trip alone."

Andy dropped his hands, suddenly remembering that he'd left out the fact that he brought Doni along with him to Del Luna. He didn't know why he'd lied about it.

"Oh," he said, uncomfortably. "I uh – I didn't go alone, actually."

Cynthia's frustration rose, her face turning a dark shade of red. This was probably why Andy had withheld this information. This reaction right here.

"What?" she asked. "Who did you bring with you?"

"Doni…"

Cynthia glared, a tad befuddled. "Doni?" She asked, trying to place the name. "Doni, who?"

And then it hit her.

"The *bartender* from the Tavern?!"

"He's my friend," Andy said quickly, trying to justify his actions. "I just needed the support, babe."

"*I* could have given you support, Andy! That's literally what I'm here for! You could have brought me!"

"I know!" Andy said, knowing full well there was no going back now. He had to be honest with her. "I just wanted to make the decision on my own. W-Without you trying to sway my decision with all your questions, and -"

"That's not how a relationship works, babe," she cut him off. "We need to make these kinds of decisions together. As a team. This is a partnership. It's not just your life we're talking about. It's *ours*."

Andy looked down at the floor, speaking once again without thinking. "You didn't ask me about your promotion," he retorted. "I didn't get any say in that."

"My promotion isn't forcing us to move!"

Another long silence fell between them, and Andy leaned against the back of the couch. He didn't know what else to say, and he wasn't going to be the first one to apologize this time. He always crumbled. Always let her win, because he hated confrontation. But not this time. He didn't regret his decision, and he wouldn't apologize for making it.

"I just wish you had told me the truth," Cynthia said quietly. Andy almost jumped at the sound of her voice. "I'm not – look, I'm not mad at you, but I feel like you've been keeping things from me lately and I don't love that. We used to tell each other everything, Andy." She stopped short, her eyes growing wide. A sinking feeling of guilt landed in the pit of her stomach as her own words resonated in her brain. She, too, had been keeping things from him. She was a liar, and a hypocrite, and she knew it.

Sighing, she crossed over to him and touched the side of his face. He reluctantly made eye contact.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

Andy nodded. "Me too."

"We'll figure this out," she added, resting her head against his chest.

"You think so?" Andy asked, his voice suddenly traced with doubt and uncertainty. A few moments before, he'd had hope, but now – he wasn't as sure.

"I want to," she said, looking up at him. "I love you, Andy. A-And I am so excited for you. This is such an incredible opportunity. We just need to keep talking about all of this. For this to work, we'll need to come up with a plan that works for both of us. *We* need to communicate, okay?"

Andy slowly wrapped his arms around her but didn't respond. She sounded sincere when she said they would figure it out. Andy only wished he believed it, too.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The break room on the eighth floor was significantly nicer than the one Cynthia was used to on the fourth. They had an espresso machine, and an entire fridge full of protein shakes, in addition to name-brand sodas and seltzers. Fresh fruit was set out on the counter alongside a bowl of Swiss chocolates. Always mysteriously stocked.

Cynthia was mid-sip of a caramel cappuccino when she felt someone stand next to her at the counter. She could already tell who it was by the scent of his cologne and tried to hide her smile behind her cup.

"Good morning, Miss Hoffman," Darren said, casually, reaching in front of her for the container of sugar. She felt a shiver run up her spine as his arm gently grazed hers.

"Good morning, Mr. Keating," she replied, calmly.

"Did you have a nice weekend?"

"Oh, I think you know how my weekend was."

Darren smirked, looking down at his own cup of coffee. "I have an inkling. Would have been more fun if you had taken up my offer, though."

Cynthia flushed, her eyes skirting the room to see if anyone else was paying attention.

It was true – Darren had certainly made an offer – one she figured was influenced mostly by alcohol.

Cynthia spent most of her weekend alone working on upcoming pieces. It was nice to have the apartment to herself, and while she missed hearing Andy randomly strumming in the bedroom, or suggesting they watch the same movie for the fortieth time – she also enjoyed being able to do whatever she wanted.

She had flipped on the news just before Andy called her to let her know he'd made it to his motel safely. She was only partly listening while he told her about Del Luna, her eyes fixated instead on the beautiful blonde man on her screen. Darren's low reporting voice drowned Andy out almost entirely.

Once their call ended, she stared at her phone, pulling up a new text message.

Guess whose mug just graced my TV screen.

Cynthia hit send and chewed on her nail, anxiously awaiting a reply. Several minutes passed, and Cynthia groaned, laying back on the couch. Of course he wasn't going to respond to her. She had told him they had to be friends. He would keep things professional, because he was a professional, and she was just a stupid girl with a –

Buzz, buzz.

Cynthia rolled over and looked at her phone on the coffee table. She scrambled to retrieve it, her eyes growing wide as she noticed Darren's name on the screen.

They're still letting that guy on the air?
Ugh. They should really fire him.

I'll see if Vera can work something out.

Good luck!
Pretty sure Vera would fuck me if she had the chance.

Cynthia shoved her face into the couch cushion and screamed. Darren had never spoken to her like that before. She also secretly wondered if Darren would fuck Vera if given the chance. She wouldn't blame him, if she was being honest.

So, is that your type then? Vera?

Clearly not.

Who is, then?

Dangerous question, Cynthia.

...
I could fight her.

Who?

Vera.

Over me?

I'm scrappy. I can take her.

Take me, instead?

Cynthia swallowed hard, staring at the proposition. He knew what he was doing, and she'd be lying if she said it wasn't tempting.

Sorry. That was forward.
I'm assuming Anthony isn't home.

Jesus Christ, Darren.

It's Andy. I know. I was just messing with you.

No, he's gone for the weekend.
Visiting Del Luna for some music thing.

That means you're free then.
I just opened a bottle of wine.
You could always join me.

Cynthia couldn't do it. She knew it was a bad idea. Even if it were just two friends – two coworkers - hanging out and enjoying a bottle of wine, the temptation would be there. She trusted Darren – but she didn't trust herself. She'd been behaving a little more dangerously lately. It was the Vera influence; she was sure of it.

That's a bad idea, D.

You're right.
Can I call you?

Instead of responding, Cynthia sat up and pressed the green button next to Darren's name. She held her breath as the phone rang twice before connecting. Darren's voice sounded relieved.

"Hey, you…" he said, softly.

"H-Hey…" she replied.

They spent a good three hours on the phone, just talking. Darren finished the bottle of wine and told her most of his life story before the night was over. He was the youngest of four siblings – all of whom were heavily involved in athletics. When he started doing things like theater, or speech and debate, he said his parents weren't exactly the most supportive.

He picked a college across the country and hadn't spoken to most of them since

taking the job at WMIS. He wasn't famous, exactly, but he was big enough in the industry that he knew when he finally went home – it was something he could brag about. And oh, how he looked forward to that day.

When Cynthia asked why he hadn't gone yet, he fell quiet. They sat in silence for a long time before Darren changed the subject. When they were finally too tired to carry on the conversation, they whispered their goodnights, and Cynthia fell asleep on the couch, clutching her phone tightly in her hand.

"Darren!" Cynthia hissed, back in the break room. "Keep your voice down."

Darren chuckled. "No one's listening, I promise." He eyed Cynthia curiously, her posture suddenly rigid. "Hey, are you okay? You seem a little…tense."

Cynthia didn't know how much she wanted to share with him. She didn't want the company to think she was even considering moving right after getting her promotion. They could yank it away from her just as easily.

"Andy…kind of dropped a bomb on me yesterday," she started slowly. "I'm still trying to figure out what I'm going to do about it."

Darren turned to face her, leaning against the counter. "A bomb? What kind of bomb?"

"He was signed by a record label."

Darren's eyes grew wide, mildly impressed by this news. "No shit. That's a big deal."

Cynthia nodded, speaking very quickly. "I know. I know it is. I am seriously so proud of him, I really am. It's just – they want him to move to the city, and I just don't think I want to do that."

Darren frowned. "Move? To which city?"

"Del Luna."

Darren's expression shifted to suspicion and concern. "Del Luna? This wouldn't be Axis Records, would it?"

"It is," Cynthia told him. "Why?"

"Did Andy say who was representing him?"

Cynthia could hardly remember. "I think it started with an H? H-Hanover?"

"Hanley?" Darren supplied.

"Yeah! That's it."

"*Reid* Hanley?"

"I think so?" Cynthia didn't quite understand why Darren was so worked up. "Darren, what's going on? Is there something we should know about this guy?"

Darren rubbed his forehead in frustration. "I'm not supposed to talk about this," he said, keeping his voice low. "But we've been working on a piece on Axis for ages now. It's been greenlit and then axed more times than I can count. Axis is known for shady contract agreements – ones that work in language that can be interpreted in different ways that make it hard for new artists to retain the rights to their own music. We've had three different musicians come forward in the last year – all had their music stolen and manipulated – and all lost out on significant amounts of money they were promised." He sighed heavily before continuing. "And almost all of them worked directly with Hanley. You need to warn Andy."

Cynthia felt her stomach churn. It was precisely what she was worried about. Andy was easily excited when it came to his music, he hadn't thought this through. She was furious he didn't bring her with him to Del Luna, and now even more upset that this could destroy their relationship.

All while fully aware she had actively been engaging in similar reckless behavior.

"He's never going to believe me," Cynthia told him. "When he told me about everything, I – I might have blown up a little bit. He'll just think I'm trying to change his mind about the move." She paused for a moment. "Darren, I want in on this story. Is there any way you can bring me on? Are you the lead?"

Darren looked conflicted. "I've conducted the majority of the testimonials and interviews, yes," he said. "But, Cynthia, I can't let you work on this piece. You're too close to it."

"What about Vera? She can pull some strings," Cynthia suggested. "What if I just helped with the research? I don't need to do the written piece or be on camera or anything. I just want to be kept in the loop."

"It's a conflict of interest, Cyn," Darren said firmly.

"Will you at least talk to her with me? She likes you. She'll listen to you," Cynthia pleaded.

"I don't know…"

Cynthia moved close to him, grabbing both of Darren's hands. "The more I know, the more likely it'll be that Andy will listen to me. *Please*, Darren."

Darren looked down at the counter, avoiding Cynthia's eyes. "Would it be so bad if he did go?" he asked. His tone wasn't malicious but certainly teetered on the hope of convincing Cynthia to stay. "I mean, from what you've said, it sounds like the two of you have been…" he trailed off, catching himself. "Never mind. It's not my place to say anything. I'm sorry."

Darren wasn't wrong, and while Cynthia avoided addressing it herself, she couldn't deny that things were rocky with her and Andy, and this move was making it a thousand times worse. She had spent a good portion of the morning wondering if it would just be easier to break things off. And then she looked at his picture on her phone screen and sighed. Even with all this going on – he was still Andy, and a part of her still loved him very much.

"Things have been *tense* between us lately, yes," Cynthia admitted. "I don't know what I want Andy to do, and I don't know how much I'll be involved with any of it, but at the end of the day – I – I love him, Darren. And I care about him. I've watched him go after this dream for years – I don't want to watch the first slimeball with a contract to ruin that for him."

Darren drew a deep breath and released a heavy sigh. "So…we're going to see Vera?"

"Yes," Cynthia said. "Please."

Darren nodded and dumped his coffee down the drain. He took her by the hand, and they headed toward the elevator, riding it to the top floor.

Darren knocked once before immediately entering Vera's office. Cynthia's eyes popped as she stepped into the suite – it's dark walls covered in fashion magazine covers and expensive-looking art. Large vases full of exotic flowers covered nearly every surface, and even the top of her desk looked like it was made of marble.

Vera and Nick Warner were sitting on a pair of tufted sofas near a wall of windows. Vera looked surprised to see them, instantly sitting up straight.

"Mr. Keating!" she said, keeping her cool. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"Sorry for barging in, Ms. Cole – Mindy said you weren't busy," Darren explained, gesturing toward the door. Mindy was Vera's assistant, and a sweet girl. Darren hadn't actually asked her anything as they approached the office, and he hoped he hadn't just thrown Mindy under the bus.

Vera forced a smile. "No worries, darling." Her eyes flitted back and forth between Darren and Cynthia. "Is there something I can help you two with?"

Darren took the lead. "Miss Hoffman would like to be added to the Axis piece, if possible. She doesn't want to write on it – but she would like to assist in the research. I know this is short notice, considering the deadline, but she has some insider knowledge that could be beneficial to -"

"And has Miss Hoffman lost her voice?" Vera asked sharply, cutting him off. She cocked her head to the side, her piercing gaze landing on Cynthia. "Why are you speaking on her behalf?"

Cynthia stepped forward, not looking directly at Vera. "I'm s-sorry, Ms. Cole. I was just -"

"Don't apologize," Vera interrupted a second time. "Just tell me what it is you think you can offer this piece. My time is precious, my dear."

"My boyfriend, Andy, was recently signed by Axis Records," Cynthia explained. "Reid Hanley, specifically."

Nick made a sound of disgust. "Hanley? What I wouldn't give to see the look on that man's face when this article finally drops. It's about time someone put him in his place."

Vera kept her focus on Cynthia. "And were there things that jumped out to you in his contract as odd?"

Cynthia clenched her hands together. "Well, I haven't seen the contract myself. But they're insisting that we uproot our life and move to Del Luna almost immediately. D-Darren mentioned that they take advantage of new talent – and I want to make sure that's not happening here."

Vera crossed her arms, leaning back on the couch. “If you have any ties or connections to Axis, you know this would be a conflict of interest, right? I can’t have you working on the piece directly.” She eyed Darren cautiously. “That being said, it wouldn’t hurt to have an extra set of hands during, say – an interview. If you catch my drift. Mr. Keating, how many do you have left before the piece drops?”

“Just one, Ma’am,” Darren answered.

“Good,” Vera said. “Take Miss Hoffman with you. And if you can get your hands on that contract, I would love to see it. It would be even better for us if your boyfriend would provide a statement as well.” She paused. “Although, I imagine that wouldn’t be the best move for his career in the long run. And even worse for your relationship, I’m sure.” Her gaze moved to Darren. “And we wouldn’t want to risk that, now, would we?”

“I’ll do my best,” Cynthia promised. She knew Andy would never agree to be interviewed, but she might be able to get a copy of his contract. If she was careful.

Nick spoke up. “Don’t underestimate Hanley, Miss Hoffman. He may be young, but he’s no stranger to the business. His grandfather built that studio himself – and his dad represents more artists than you can even imagine. Hanley’s been trying to follow in their footsteps for years – but he’s also been trying to do it the easy way. Cutting corners is going to bite him in the ass one day – but in the meantime, he doesn’t care who gets burned by his carelessness.”

“I don’t want that to happen to Andy,” Cynthia said, sincerely.

“Then I suppose you two better get working,” Nick said. “The article drops Friday. You’re in crunch time.”

Darren gave Nick a quick nod and reached to guide Cynthia out the door. Before he could step out into the hall, Vera spoke up.

“Mr. Keating, can I have a word with you?”

He stopped and looked down at Cynthia, who appeared just as nervous as he was. He cleared his throat and turned back to Vera.

“Yes, Ma’am. Of course.”

“Nick, darling, would you please escort Miss Hoffman back to her desk? Mr. Keating and I won’t be long.”

Nick got to his feet and offered his arm to Cynthia. “Come, Miss Hoffman.”

Once Cynthia and Nick were gone, Darren let the door close, and he lifted his gaze to meet Vera’s. She was now standing and moving in his direction, her eyes narrowed, dangerously, as though she were looking for some kind of secret.

“You made your move,” she accused.

Darren swallowed. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, loftily.

“Oh, come on,” she laughed, rolling her eyes. “I could smell the pheromones from across the room. Do you think it’s smart to bring her on this piece? You’re helping her partner, you know.”

Darren grimaced. “I’m aware, yes. But I’m also a good reporter. I’m putting the needs of the story ahead of my own…”

“Feelings?” Vera quirked a perfectly sculpted eyebrow.

Darren looked down. He was embarrassed to be admitting this to Vera, who often reminded him not to let his emotions take over. It showed weakness. And Darren didn’t get to where he was in the company by being weak.

Vera’s expression softened slightly as she tilted her head. “You really do care for her, don’t you? This isn’t just some *fling* for you.”

Darren refused to look at her.

“Is there anything else you need from me, Ms. Cole?”

Vera waved a hand and shook her head, realizing she wasn’t going to get anything more out of him. She would watch this inevitable disaster crash and burn in real time - she was sure of it.

“You can go,” she said. “Just remember to tread carefully. These kinds of situations usually end in devastation. I wouldn’t want you to get hurt.”

Before Darren turned to leave, his face contorted in frustration. “With all due respect, Ms. Cole – you were the one who told me to do this. *You* told me to go after her.”

Vera stared at him before throwing her head back in a wild laugh. Darren felt his face burn.

“Oh, darling,” Vera said, pompously. “I never thought you’d actually *do* it.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Cynthia arrived home, still replaying everything she wanted to say to Andy in her head. She removed her coat and kicked her shoes off before stepping into the kitchen. Andy leaned over the stove, avidly stirring what she could only assume was mac and cheese – again. It was the one thing Andy craved when he was the most stressed.

And *fuck* did it sound good to Cynthia, too.

"Hey baby," she said softly, walking toward him.

Andy didn't look at her. "You're home late."

It wasn't an accusation – just a statement. He wasn't even looking for an explanation.

"Sorry," she apologized. "I was pulled into a project that needed some extra attention. I should have texted you."

Andy shrugged, continuing to stir his noodles. Cynthia sighed, loud enough for Andy to flinch, bracing himself.

"Andy, can we talk?"

He paused. "Isn't that what we're doing?"

"I mean about this whole Axis thing," she replied. It was best just to dive right in. No need to beat around the bush, she told herself. Just get it over with.

Andy shook his head. "I think we should give it a little more time before we talk about this again. I'm still trying to -"

"We don't *have* time, Andy!" Cynthia burst. "W-We don't have time. You signed the papers, so we have to make a decision." She took deep breath. "We're running an article on Axis on Friday. I – I just need you to know that."

He finally turned, noticing that her hands were shaking. He stared at her, his expression hardening. "They are, or *you* are?"

"*They* are," Cynthia said. "I'm not allowed to work on it directly, but I am a part of it."

Andy remained stiff. "What's the story?"

"Honestly, it's nothing profound," Cynthia admitted. "It's the same old, same old you hear from anyone in the entertainment industry. Artists are coming forward to say they were scammed out of their contracts. Lost their money and their music. Most of whom… worked with Hanley."

Andy's tone shifted to bitter. "Do you know how awfully *convenient* this sounds for you?" he asked, crossing his arms. "What *incredible* timing."

Cynthia knew he wasn't going to believe her. "Andy, you just have to trust me on this," she said. "I'm not doing this to ruin this opportunity for you. I swear. I didn't even know this investigation was happening until today."

"So, how did it even come up?" Andy pressed.

"I was just telling Darren about your deal, and –"

Something twisted painfully in Andy's chest. "Darren, huh? You've been spending an awful lot of time with this Darren guy lately."

"Andy…"

Andy turned his attention back to the boiling pot on the stove, removing it and taking it to the sink where he started to strain it out. He was angry and upset, and a little bit betrayed. But also, guilty. He believed her, to an extent, but it still didn't change his mind.

"I'm telling you this as a courtesy, Andy…" Cynthia continued. "I don't want you to get hurt. I know how important all of this is to you. If you just let me look at the contract, I could help you. I can see if it aligns with these other artists, and you can -"

Andy dropped the pan in the sink, rounding angrily. "Wait, hold on – are you saying you want to use me as a *source* for this article?"

"You don't have to agree to it!" Cynthia tried to backtrack. "B-But if there's something in there – something shady – it could blow this whole story out of the water!"

"And my career would be dead," Andy said bluntly.

Cynthia frowned. "N-Not necessarily," she squeaked, not entirely believing it herself. "You could be picked up by another record studio. I mean – your name would be out there, right? You're so talented, Andy. You don't have to just say yes to the first person who comes along."

This hit Andy hard.

But not in the way Cynthia intended it to.

"And what if no one else comes along?" he asked. "What if this is my one shot?"

Cynthia knew this could very well be true. It was a miracle Reid found Andy in the first place. Andy was a great performer but so were so many others. This could truly be his only chance.

"Then, you've got a decision to make," she said, her voice weak. "What are you willing to sacrifice to get what you want? I'm not forcing you to be a part of this investigation. I'm not going to tell you what you should or should not do – but I am involved in this, whether you want me to be or not. This is *our* life, Andy. Together."

Andy finally agreed. They would have to find some kind of compromise to make this work – and in order to find something they could compromise on - Andy needed more information. He needed to see the contract again. He needed to find out if there was any merit to the stories Cynthia mentioned.

"Okay," he said. "But – I need to talk to Hanley. Is that okay for me to do? Will that get you in trouble at all?"

Cynthia felt the tiniest bit of relief. "N-No," she said. "I mean, yes, I think it should be fine. Hanley knows about the article, apparently."

Andy turned silently and finished putting together the mac and cheese. Cynthia watched, waiting for him to say something. When he was done, he put it into a Tupperware container and started toward the door, grabbing his phone from the counter.

"I'm going for a walk," he said. "I'm going to call Hanley. You don't have to wait for me – you might as well eat while it's still warm."

"Do you want me to come with you?" Cynthia offered. "We could both talk to him."

"No," Andy declined. "I'm not making any decisions without you, I promise. I just need to do this part on my own – and then we can figure out the next steps, with all the information, together."

Cynthia nodded and watched as he slipped on his flannel and disappeared out the door.

Andy walked nearly a mile before gathering up the courage to call Reid. He felt bad bothering him after office hours, but this was important.

The phone rang three times before it connected, and Reid's voice cut through the night air.

"Andy McLayne!" he said, excitedly. "How goes it, rockstar? Miss me already?"

"H-Hey, Reid. Sorry to call you so late…" Andy started awkwardly.

"Nonsense," Reid insisted. "In this industry, it's pretty much lunchtime over here. What's going on, kid? Everything okay?"

Andy settled down on a park bench by a small brook, sighing heavily. "I don't know, honestly. I uh – I have to talk to you about something, and it's not exactly comfortable – but I need to know the truth. I have a…friend who works for WMIS…"

"Ah…" Reid said.

"And they happened to mention that they're running a piece on Axis later this week. A-About you, specifically. Do you know about this?"

"Of course, I do," Reid said, nonchalant.

Andy was surprised by his honesty. "O-Oh." He didn't know what else to say. It didn't sound like Reid was worried about the article at all.

Reid laughed. "Is that all you're worried about? Listen, it comes with the territory, kid. Bad press, good press. Everything in-between. If I had a dime for every time one of those

articles rolled out – well, I wouldn't be *rich rich*, but I'd be pretty comfortable."

Andy picked at a knot in the wood of the bench. "So…you're saying you *don't* have a lot of money?"

"Not nearly as much as those vultures at WMIS seem to think I do. Sure, my dad did back in the day, but I'm not him. I'm still starting out. I wasn't just handed this position – I've had to work for it, just like everyone else." He stopped. "Wait, is that what the article is saying? That I'm stealing money from my clients?"

"I don't know exactly," Andy told him. "But it kind of sounds like it – yeah."

"Jesus Christ," Reid sighed. "People love you until an album flops and then, suddenly, it's all your fault. Listen, there are plenty of bad guys in the industry. Hell, I'll be honest with you - I wouldn't even say I'm a *good* guy in the industry. But I'm not a monster. My contracts are fair – you saw them yourself – but not everyone is cut out for stardom. The fame – the money – the attention – the booze – all of it goes to their heads, really fuckin' fast, and then they gotta find a scapegoat to blame it on. And - surprise – that scapegoat tends to be the person who got them into the game in the first place."

Andy hesitated. "So, you're not…scamming anyone?"

It was a dumb question. Andy knew it was a dumb question, and yet he asked it anyway. He waited for Reid to laugh and hang up.

"Not intentionally at least," Reid replied. "This industry is a crapshoot, kid – I'm not gonna sugarcoat it for ya. Sometimes it works out, sometimes it doesn't. You gotta be willing to take a risk or two - put it all on the table – and be willing to work for it. But it's not easy to do alone, so you gotta make sure the people who are helping you are taken care of, too. Lots of forgotten names and faces in this business. Magic doesn't happen overnight – or without an army behind it."

Andy nodded, even though Reid couldn't see him. This all made sense. It wasn't news to him – that it would be difficult and could possibly fail spectacularly. But he wanted it. He wanted it so badly, he was willing to give up just about everything to at least give it a shot.

"Listen, Andy," Reid said, reading the silence. "If you've changed your mind, I'll give you this week to think about it. Check out the article and let me know how you feel by Sunday. If you decide you want someone else in the company to represent you – no problem. I can make that happen. If you want out entirely – *poof* – you're free. But if you're willing to work for this – if you take a chance on me – I promise you I'm going to be right there with you every step of the way."

Reid fell quiet. Andy was thankful for the chance to back out if he wanted to – but knew he would be agonizing over his decision all week long.

"I didn't sign you because you're an easy bottom line." It was the most genuine Reid had sounded the whole conversation. "I signed you because you're talented, and every so often, I do really like working with people who are in this for the love of music. And you, Andy McLayne, love music."

Andy smiled. Reid was smooth.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Shoot."

"How the hell did you find me?"

Reid chuckled. "That's a funny story, actually. Would you believe I was just passin' through? Had to stop to take a piss – your little bar seemed like a safe place to do it and maybe get a beer while I was at it. Just got lucky it happened to be while you were playin'."

"Luck, huh?" Andy said, amused.

"Swear on my life."

Andy hoped luck would continue to be on his side when it came to this decision.

"T-Thanks, Reid. I'll think about it and get back to you as soon as I can. I really appreciate you takin' the time to talk to me."

"No problem, kid," Reid said. "You take it easy, okay? I know this decision is a tough one to make, but I also know you'll do what's best for you in the long run."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Doni needed some fresh air. He kept replaying the events from the weekend over and over in his head, and he needed to get the anxious energy out of his system. He pulled on a hoodie and started for the park downtown, reading the latest slew of texts from Erik.

Shelly's baby shower was coming up and he still hadn't called her. Erik insisted he needed to immediately, or else Shelly would be stressed about headcounts and the amount of food she needed and how many place settings they had to put out.

With a sigh, he tapped on Shelly's name – praying for a voicemail. As the phone continued to ring, he got his wish and quickly tried to think of an excuse while the message played.

"H-Hey, Shelly – it's Doni. I'm so sorry I've been a little distant since – well, you know. Life's just been a bit crazy. B-But of course, you know about crazy. I'm sure your life's been pretty nuts." He was rambling. He needed to get down to it. "A-Anyway, I don't think I'm going to be able to make it this weekend. I'm *really* sorry. Weekends are just tough with work, a-and I'm not sure if Erik and I should be – er, I – I don't think we should be in the same room. For now, at least. I'll explain later. I'll make it up to you – I promise! O-Okay, bye."

He barely hung up the phone when an alert came buzzing through. Doni squinted at the Instagram notification, unsure he was reading it correctly.

AndyURaStar is now following you.

Doni's heart skipped, and he broke out into a wide grin. A moment later, a second notification came through.

AndyURaStar tagged you in a photo.

Doni's hands shook as he clicked on the notification and the photo of the two of them from the weekend appeared on his screen. Doni's heart shifted into overdrive.

The caption read: *That Valley sun ain't got nothin' on us.* With a little fire emoji.

Doni read it a good twenty times, his smile getting bigger with every read. They looked like a couple. This *felt* like a photo of a couple. Nowhere on the post did he indicate they were friends, or even besties, which Doni knew was a ridiculous thing to focus on, but it gave Doni another tiny sliver of hope.

Without even thinking, he followed Andy back and liked the post, commenting: "Fuck, we're hot" with a little kissy face, accompanied by a sweaty face. It was a bold move, but Doni was willing to risk it.

Beaming, he looked up and his heart almost stopped. In the distance, on a park bench, he spotted an unmistakable mop of ginger hair.

"Andy?" he breathed, slowly making his way toward the bench. The second he was certain it really was Andy, he raised his voice, calling out: "Andy? Is that you?"

Andy leapt from his seat and whirled around, stunned to see Doni standing behind him.

"Doni?" he asked, confused. "What are you doing here? I just tagged you in something on Instagram."

Doni held up his phone. "I – I know," he laughed, nervously. "I just commented on it. I – I swear I'm not stalking you."

Andy smiled faintly. "I'll be honest, I don't think I'd be upset if you were."

Forget Doni's heart – if Andy kept talking like this, he was going to wake up other organs. "What are you doing out this way?" he asked, hoping to change the subject to something a little more casual. "Do you live out here?"

Andy gestured over his shoulder. "Couple miles that way," he said. "I just needed to go for a walk. You?"

"Same," Doni said. He frowned a little – noticing a trace of anxiety on Andy's face.

“Are you alright? Did you…talk to Cynthia?”

Andy nodded, quickly. “Yeah. It did not go well.”

Doni understood why Andy needed to go for a walk. He felt conflicted about what to do. He wanted to stay and support Andy if he needed it, but there was a possibility Andy really needed some alone time.

“I can leave, if you want me to,” Doni offered, softly. “I didn’t mean to -”

“No,” Andy said, his eyes pleading. “Please stay.”

They took a seat back on the bench, and Doni immediately thought of their moment on the couch at the record studio. He was so close to telling Andy everything. He wondered if he’d have the courage to do it again.

A long silence passed between them before Andy decided to speak.

“Cynthia isn’t going to move,” he said. “And it would be wrong of me to ask her to. On top of that, WMIS is going to be running a piece on Axis – and it’s not good.”

Doni’s brow furrowed. “What are they saying?”

“They’re saying Axis scams their new stars out of their money, I guess. And the rights to their own music. That part’s the scarier one, if I’m honest. I called Reid and asked him about it directly. He says he isn’t scamming anyone, but he says this is normal for the music industry. He also said, if I want to back out of the contract after I read the article, he’ll let me. Said I have until Sunday to decide.”

Doni fidgeted, anxiously. “You think you’ll back out?” he asked.

Andy shook his head. “I’m so close, Doni,” he said. “I’ve dreamt about this for so long, and it’s so close. I don’t think I have it in me to turn all this down. Even if what Cynthia says is true.”

Doni understood but still had his concerns. “Just make sure they don’t find a way to crush your dream. I don’t know about that Reid guy – but I already told you that. There’s just something about him I don’t trust. This doesn’t help that.”

“He says I can go with a different agent, if I want.”

Doni felt a little better about this detail. While he didn’t deny the allegations, his arguments kind of made sense from a business perspective. But to Doni, all business felt sleazy.

“That’s reassuring, I suppose,” he admitted.

After a beat, Andy turned to look at him. “What’s your dream?” he asked abruptly.

Doni stared in return; unsure he understood the question. “My…dream?”

“Like, what do you want to do with your life? What do you want to be? What motivates you?” Andy elaborated.

Doni honestly didn’t think about it much. Thinking too far ahead made him anxious. He preferred to handle life as it came to him.

“I don’t think I have one,” Doni finally admitted. “A dream, I mean. I don’t think we’re meant to do just *one* thing for the rest of our lives. Why put ourselves in a box like that? I want to do…whatever I want to do.”

Andy was jealous of that mentality. He didn’t understand it at all, but he longed for that kind of freedom.

“But, if you could be anything,” he pressed.

“I’d be a bartender,” Doni said, looking him directly in the eye. “I like it. And I’m really good at it. I like people, Andy. I like hearing about people’s stories. That’s what motivates me, I guess.”

Andy smiled sadly. “Is that why you’re always willing to listen to my bullshit?”

Doni remained aloof. “Yeah, I guess that’s one of the reasons.”

Andy felt bad for bringing the mood down. He leaned into Doni, nudging him gently.

“Is the other reason my raw sex appeal?”

Doni regretted wearing tight pants almost immediately. He crossed his legs as subtly as he could muster but didn’t answer Andy’s question – only flashing him a slight smile.

Andy laughed awkwardly. “I’m…kidding.”

Doni nudged Andy back. “What about you?” he asked. “What is it about music that you love so much?”

“Well,” Andy said, looking down. “It wasn’t my first choice. I uh – I was a football player, back in the day.”

Whatever Doni had expected, it wasn’t that. He couldn’t help himself – he laughed

hard, hanging on to Andy's shoulder for stability.

"Shut up. No, you weren't!"

Andy reluctantly nodded, his face turning red. "Yeah. Sure was. I was pretty good, too – had a couple schools lookin' at me for scholarships. But then – one day – a friend of mine was having one of those like – homecoming bonfire parties – and everyone got super drunk. Except for me. So, I offered to be the DD and take a bunch of them home when the party was over." Andy shifted uncomfortably. "Some asshole t-boned us. I was the only one who didn't walk away from the crash."

Doni didn't move his hand from Andy's shoulder, now squeezing it gently. "S-Shit, Andy. I'm so sorry."

"N-No, it's fine," he said. "I mean, it is now at least. My leg gives me a hard time if I stand for too long, b-but you know that." The corners of Andy's mouth turned upward just slightly. "I'll never play football again, that's for sure. Back then, it didn't look good for me at all. I spent most of my Senior year recovering. Couldn't go to class – no football – nothing. Just physical therapy when that kicked in." He stopped, drawing a nervous breath. "For a long time, I kind of wished I hadn't made it, you know? As fucked up as that sounds. I'd lost everything I'd worked so hard for. And I was bored – a-and really fucking lonely."

He sniffled loudly and Doni moved closer, wrapping an arm around Andy's waist. His free hand rested on Andy's thigh. Andy didn't mind the closeness.

"So," he continued. "I learned how to play guitar. I could do it comfortably sitting down, and it gave me something to focus on. It…quite literally saved my life. Music became my whole world. S-So…So, that's why this is so hard for me. I lost the thing that gave me purpose back then, and it almost destroyed me. I can't imagine going through that again. Having to start over." He glanced at Doni. "I feel like I should feel this way about Cynthia – about being afraid of losing her or having to start over in a new relationship if this doesn't work out – b-but I don't. A-And I'm aware that makes me the world's shittiest boyfriend."

Doni shook his head. "No," he said, speaking from experience. "No, it doesn't. Trust me, if she has the right to say she doesn't want to move – you have the right to say that you're going to go. Going separate ways isn't always the end of the world. Sometimes it's…I dunno, freeing. For both people involved."

Andy wiped a tear from his eye. "You want to move to Del Luna with me?" he asked, laughing harshly. "I'm gonna need a roommate. And you owe me a night at the bar."

Doni could not determine whether Andy was serious or not, so he refrained from answering, just in case. In all actuality, he would up and follow Andy anywhere if he asked him to.

"That was another joke," Andy assured him. "Kind of. I – I think. Maybe. I would never ask anyone to make that move for me."

Doni scooted closer, his expression suddenly somber. Andy felt his breathing shift as he wondered if he'd said something wrong. He didn't mean to upset Doni.

"Please say something," Andy leaned in close, his voice an anxious whisper as their foreheads touched. "You're making me nervous."

Doni sniffled and Andy reached out, instinctively grabbing Doni's hand.

"Did I do something wrong?"

When Doni opened his eyes, two enormous tears rolled down his cheeks. Andy immediately panicked, gripping Doni's hand tight – apologies tumbling out of his mouth.

"No, no, no!" Doni stopped him, brushing his tears away. "No, *I'm* sorry. I – I was just thinking about a world that you weren't a part of a-and I – s-sorry, I just -" Doni drew a staggering breath, forcing himself to calm down before finishing his sentence. "I'm just really, really glad that you're still here."

Andy felt his heart break as Doni's voice trembled. He was focused on only that part of the story – the part where Andy thought he was not worth keeping alive. The thought of this absolutely devastated him. Andy pulled Doni tight to him, rubbing his back, comfortingly.

"Hey, hey…" Andy made soft shushing sounds. "I'm right here. I'm right here, and I'm not going…" he trailed off, realizing what he was about to say was a lie. He *was* going somewhere – and soon. But it didn't mean they couldn't still be friends and stay in each other's lives. "I'm not going very far. I promise, I will always be there for you when you need me."

It took everything in Doni not to start sobbing. "I'm sorry," he apologized again. "I don't know why I'm so fucking emotional. I just…"

He couldn't finish the sentence.

I just don't want to lose you.

I just don't want to know what the world looks like without you.

I just want to keep you safe.

"Please, don't apologize," Andy whispered, not letting him go.

They remained embraced on the little park bench by the brook for what felt like hours. As they watched the fireflies come out and listened to owls in the distance – Doni carefully played with Andy's fingers, tracing them gently – placing Andy's hand in his own repeatedly. Andy watched him with fond admiration.

"Hey, Doni?" he asked, knowing it had to be nearly midnight.

"Mm?" Doni had made himself comfortable, his head resting on Andy's shoulder. He laced his fingers with Andy's once again, giving them a small squeeze.

"I think I've made my decision."

Doni peered up at him. "Yeah?"

Andy nodded. "I'm scared, but I think it's the right thing to do. For me. I – I don't think I'm going to say it out loud yet, but when I do – you'll be the first to know."

Doni pressed his lips firmly to Andy's shoulder, nuzzling back into the crook a moment later.

"I trust you," he said. "Whatever happens – it happens for a reason. You deserve good things. Remember that."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Cynthia should have been paying attention to the interview. She was there to gain more information on Axis Records, and how Reid takes advantage of his clients – to learn what she needed to look for in Andy's contract.

But instead, she stared longingly at the back of Darren's head, eyeing the little trail of blonde hair on his muscular neck. She watched how engaged he was with his hands when speaking, and how he tilted his head to the left whenever he was actively listening.

Cynthia knew she was in trouble.

When the interview was over, she scribbled notes in her journal, desperately trying to remember half of what the witness said. She was staring off across the park when a coffee cup appeared in front of her face.

"Caramel cappuccino?" Darren offered politely.

Cynthia graciously took it from him as he sat down next to her on the bench. "You are a lifesaver. Was it that obvious I haven't slept?"

"Pretty sure I caught you drifting off a couple times," he teased. "If I'm that boring to listen to, just tell me. I can handle it."

Cynthia shook her head, her thumb tracing the lid of the cup. "Not at all," she insisted.

They fell quiet as they both took sips from their coffee. Cynthia tried not to take notice of Darren staring at her.

"I said I wouldn't pry, so I won't," he started, softly. "But…are you doing okay?"

Cynthia didn't know how to answer him. She was certainly still anxious – her whole future, everything she and Andy had planned – was up in the air, but she wasn't sure she was as upset as she should have been. And she was desperately trying to figure out why. Where had they gone wrong? If they stopped loving each other – what happened? And for how long?

"I'm…fine," she answered, genuinely meaning it. "I'm just not sure the decision I've made is the right one."

Darren nodded, trying to suppress his surprise. "And…what have you decided?"

"I'm not saying, just yet," she told him. "I don't think I'm ready to tell anyone. I have to give it just a little more thought. Telling people makes it feel…final."

Darren looked down, fiddling with his coffee cup. Cynthia glanced over at him, noticing that he was no longer smiling. He looked tired.

"I know that's not the answer you were looking for," she said, resting a hand on his arm. "I'm…I'm sorry."

Darren shook his head. "No," he said. "You don't owe me anything, Cynthia."

Cynthia knew what he meant, but she still felt guilty for not telling him what she was thinking. They were friends, and they'd been mostly good about just staying friends, and even if she didn't owe him an explanation – or anything else – she could tell the toll it was taking on him.

She reached out, cupping his chin gently.

"Darren?" she whispered.

His eyes met hers, and his lips parted slightly, as if he might say something. When he didn't, Cynthia leaned forward and kissed his cheek. He released a soft sigh, and broke into a wide grin, laughing. Cynthia laughed as well, leaning into him.

"Thank you for the coffee," she said, resting her head on his shoulder.

"You are welcome," he replied, laying his head on hers. "You are so welcome…"

The week carried on, and Cynthia assisted as best she could with the investigation into Axis. She managed to get a copy of Andy's contract, and compared her notes to what the contract entailed, but admittedly, found nothing that seemed concerning.

Andy watched from a corner of the living room as Cynthia pored over the contract a good three – four – maybe, five times. She asked if she could let Darren look at it as well, but Andy refused. He agreed they could take it to a lawyer, but a lawyer was not something they could afford on such short notice.

Cynthia became very aware of how little she and Andy interacted outside of discussions around the agreement. She was working late nights, and Andy spent most of his time outside of work at the Tavern. Even when it wasn't an open mic. By the time he got home, Cynthia was already in bed, and he would watch something on TV before crawling into bed next to her.

He didn't cuddle. He didn't hold her. And when they touched by accident, it sent a chill up Cynthia's spine – and not in the good way. Sex was completely out of the question. When she thought about it, she couldn't remember the last time he kissed her.

It wasn't her fault. And it wasn't his fault. They were growing apart, and Cynthia knew they would have to have the conversation they were both dreading sooner rather than later.

Friday arrived and the article dropped. It was professional, but passionate, outlining the details of each of the breached contracts, with testimonials from three former Axis artists – mostly young women. They didn't accuse Hanley of any indecent behavior beyond causing them to lose out on money they were promised, but the comments sections of the online versions of the article were brutal. Cynthia almost felt bad for Hanley.

Almost.

She wanted to talk to Darren about it – get his thoughts and feelings about the public response, but he hadn't been able to track him down. As the end of the day approached, she anxiously awaited messages from Andy regarding his decision. She was certain he'd read it. He wouldn't be home when she got back – he'd be at the Tavern. They probably wouldn't talk until morning.

Giving into her anxiety, Cynthia made her way toward Darren's office.

Meanwhile, on the top floor, Darren, Vera, and Nick all stood around Vera's office with glasses of champagne in their hands. Vera was more than a couple of glasses in, and Nick had turned a pleasant shade of red as his inebriation started to seep through his usually professional composure. Darren, on the other hand, hadn't even taken a sip – and neither of them noticed.

"Hanley's probably pissing himself at this point!" Nick guffawed, clapping a hand on the back of the couch. "Did you see the number of calls that came in today?"

Vera nodded, taking another swig from her glass. "Axis already wants to do a piece in their defense," she said, giving a haughty little wiggle. "Hook, line, and sinker, sweetheart. That's what I call business."

Darren looked up, confused. "Hold on, what do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, I mean, people will want to hear both sides, right?" Vera explained. "Allowing Axis to say their peace means more traffic for us in the long run. You, of all people, should know how this works, darling."

Darren set his glass down on the edge of Vera's desk, frowning. "Was it true? What we wrote? O-Or did I get suckered into some kind of -"

"Of course, it was!" Nick said quickly. "We wouldn't run it if it wasn't true. We do have journalistic integrity, my boy. But in this industry, it's not exactly – *groundbreaking* news. Shitty people will do shitty things. We report on it and then they beg us to print a rebuttal. It's a cycle." He cocked his head to the side, an idea striking him. "Do you think Miss Hoffman would be interested in writing the Axis perspective?"

Darren seethed. He opened his mouth to retort when Vera laughed loudly, nearly spilling her entire glass on the floor.

"If she's ditched that boyfriend of hers, maybe!" she said. "As long as they're still together, it's a conflict of interest. No can do." She eyed Darren with a dangerous smirk. "Any updates on that situation?"

Darren glared at her. Nick looked back and forth between them, confused at first – then he finally picked up on what Vera was implying.

"Oh no, Darren…" Nick shook his head in disappointment. "You know better."

Clenching his fists, Darren turned for the door, not even wanting to bother trying to explain himself to either of them.

"Excuse me," he said coldly.

Vera waved a hand after him. "Oh, you don't have to leave! We're just teasing, darling! Stay! Have another glass of champagne."

Darren gripped the door handle, keeping his voice low and steady as he bid them goodnight. Once in the hallway, he marched to the elevator, his head spinning. He felt bad for dragging Cynthia into this whole mess – potentially ruining Andy's career. He didn't even know the guy, but he didn't deserve to have his dream ripped from him – over what?

Clickbait? Tabloid-level drama?

When he opened the door to his office, the last thing he expected to see was Cynthia – but there she was, in a short, grey dress, leaning against his desk with her hands clasped tightly together in front of her. She smiled weakly as he entered, closing the door slowly behind him.

"Cynthia…" he sounded surprised but not upset. "What are you doing here?"

"Your door was unlocked," she told him. "I assumed you were still here."

"I mean, what are you doing *here* – in my office?"

She shifted nervously, glancing at the floor. "I wanted to talk to you. I didn't want to go home just yet. I – I didn't know where else to go."

Darren took a couple steps toward her. "…Andy's going to be upset about the story, isn't he?"

She nodded. "Most likely. And I can't blame him. We kind of did Hanley dirty with this one."

Darren didn't disagree.

"We haven't spoken much this week," she continued. "I think he's keeping the deal. No matter what the article says. H-He's going to move."

Darren's gaze didn't waver. He took another step closer. "A-And you?" he ventured to ask.

It was time to tell him what she'd decided. He deserved to hear it.

"I'm not."

Darren couldn't even hide the look of relief on his face. His shoulders fell and he heaved a few deep breaths before clearing his throat.

"And what does that mean for the two of you?" he asked, trying not to sound too eager.

Cynthia hesitated. "I don't know," she said, honestly. "I watched him fight for this, Darren. I watched over the last five years as he practiced night and day. I watched him stay up all night long – just to get a song right. I've watched him play in front of two people and a hundred people. I – I am *so* happy for him." She gripped her hands tighter as they shook, violently. She could feel the tears pricking the corner of her eyes. "But I am not willing to give up my dream for his – and I would never expect him to do the same for mine. I know staying is the right thing to do – for me. A-And it's the only time I've been selfish in our entire relationship." She paused, looking up at Darren. "W-Well – almost."

Understanding what she meant, Darren closed the gap between them, standing just in front of her. His heart thundered – he wanted to touch her so badly – but he waited. He needed to know for sure what her intentions were.

"Being selfish isn't always a bad thing," he told her. "If you left, I think you'd be miserable. A-And I'm not just saying that because *I* selfishly want you to stay."

Cynthia nodded. He was right.

"If you stay," Darren's voice dropped to a whisper. "And he goes – would you be willing to give us a shot? A real shot?"

"That's not a fair question," Cynthia replied, her voice trembling.

"Why not?"

"Because we don't know if I'm actually going to -"

Darren's hands fell to her waist, pulling her against him. "You already said that you're staying. I'm not even talking about hypotheticals anymore, Cynthia." He touched the side of her face, gently, his gaze locked onto hers. Desperation dripped from every word that fell from his mouth. "I don't want to be *friends*. I don't want to be *colleagues*. I *hate* not being able to be with you."

Cynthia felt the same way, and she was tired of fighting it. A single tear rolled down

her cheek.

"I tried really hard to stay professional this week," he said. "But the more I'm around you, the more I can't ignore it. I'm going to ask you again. If you stay -"

"Yes."

Darren's eyes grew wide. "W-Will you -"

"Yes."

Cynthia nodded, feverishly. She repeated the word 'yes' as Darren held her face with both of his hands. His mouth hovered over hers.

"If you want me to stop," he breathed. "Tell me to stop."

"I don't," she whimpered. "Please, don't stop."

Darren crushed his mouth to hers, one arm locking around her neck, and the other falling to her waist. Her fingers twisted into his shirt, holding him against her.

Darren was thankful that he kept his desk mostly clear as they shuffled back toward it, together. Cynthia fussed with the buttons on his shirt as he lifted her onto the desk, his hands sliding up her skirt.

"D-Darren," she panted as his lips traveled down her neck. "T-Touch me – *please*."

With a soft moan, he swiftly slipped two fingers into his mouth and then between her legs, moving aside the fabric of her underwear. Cynthia shuddered and gasped, rolling her head against his shoulder as he stroked her.

"T-That okay?" he asked, softly. He felt his pants tighten at the thought of what he was finally going to do to her on this desk. How real all this suddenly was.

Cynthia rocked her hips forward, riding his hand as she moaned deeply. Her lips met his again, gasping between every kiss.

"W-What do you need?" Darren panted.

"F-Fuck me," she groaned, desperately. "P-Please - I want you to fuck me."

"I – I don't have a -"

"I'm on the pill," she said, impatiently. "G-God, Darren, please…"

Still kissing her, he fumbled with his pants, shimmying them down enough to release himself. He stroked his already rigid cock a few times before aligning himself with her. She gave him a small nod, and he pulled her to him, thrusting deep.

"Fuck!" Cynthia cried out, throwing her head back. "Oh my *god* – yes!"

Darren tried to keep his rhythm as he pulled her dress up. Cynthia found herself tangled in the fabric, laughing.

"D-Darren – s-stop," she told him. "L-Let's move to the couch."

Darren reluctantly pulled out, a little embarrassed. They looked ridiculous – half-undressed and horny – Cynthia's hair already a mess and Darren's pants around his ankles. Cynthia slipped off the desk and kissed him, tenderly.

"Take my clothes off," she instructed, noticing his worry. "And fuck me on the couch."

Darren nodded, properly removing all her clothing before working on his own. He kissed her slowly as she laid back on the couch, taking a moment to admire every inch of her.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he whispered, his tongue tracing one of her nipples. Cynthia bit her lip, arching her back so her chest moved toward him. He moaned, taking as much of her breast in his mouth as he could fit, sucking and teasing lightly.

Lifting his head, he slid down onto the floor, pulling her legs toward him. She panted, looking confused as he lowered himself between them.

"W-What are you doing?" she asked, panic settling in. "No – no, you don't have to do that."

Darren frowned a little. "I know – but I *want* to…"

"I-It's…It's…" Cynthia covered her face, trying to hide her embarrassment.

"Listen," he said, gently caressing her thighs. "If you hate it – I promise, I'll stop. Okay?"

Cynthia hesitated for only a moment before curiosity won. She nodded and Darren lowered his head, plunging his tongue inside her.

Cynthia released an almost feral moan – unsure she could remember the last time anyone had gone down on her. It wasn't like Andy was opposed to it – but Cynthia had always been self-conscious about it. She worried that it would taste weird, or she might be sweaty – maybe had too much hair - and since Andy was ever the people pleaser – *especially in bed* – it only took her telling him once not to do it that he never dared to try it again.

But *this*. This was different. Every single fear about it went out the window as Darren eagerly dragged his tongue along every lip and fold – pressing it flat against her clit – then sucking gently. She laid her head back in the cushions, certain she could cum from this alone.

Darren moaned, his lips causing gentle vibrations against her. He smiled as she ran a hand through his hair, the weight of her legs relaxing over his shoulders. She liked it – in fact, she liked it a lot.

Satisfied with how wet she was, Darren wiped his mouth as he leaned up to kiss her. "You ready for me, gorgeous?"

Cynthia nodded and giggled as he joined her on the couch, gently guiding her onto his lap. He held tight to her waist as she rode him, earnestly – their passionate cries echoing off the walls of his office. Darren secretly hoped no one else had decided to stay late.

"F-Fuck, D-Darren!"

Cynthia whimpered, bringing her lips to his. Her hands held tight to his neck as his fingers dug into her hips. She heard a soft growl growing in the back of his throat as his thrusts became slower and more intentional. He locked his gaze with hers, his mouth opened wide in an almost silent cry.

"J-Just like that, baby–" he instructed, finally finding his voice. "R-Roll your hips like – oh *GOD* – don't stop, Cyn. J-Jesus Christ - please don't fucking stop…"

Cynthia's head fell backward and Darren's gaze followed the veins in her neck down to her breasts as they bounced along with the rest of her – to the spot between them where he could watch them come together.

They finished within seconds of each other – Darren lifting Cynthia almost over his shoulder. He slid his fingers inside her again, dropping his voice low.

"Do it again," he commanded, his thumb landing on her clit once more.

Cynthia screamed as a second wave of pleasure coursed through her. She pressed a hand to her forehead as her legs trembled uncontrollably, and she came a second time. Satisfied and spent, they collapsed onto the couch, holding each other tight. Darren brushed Cynthia's hair away from her sweaty forehead and kissed her deeply.

"Fuck," Cynthia said softly, catching her breath. "T-That was…"

"Incredible?" Darren offered.

Cynthia nodded and pressed her lips to his again. Incredible didn't even begin to describe it. She had never orgasmed more than once in one go. She didn't even think it was possible. If Darren had it in him – she was sure she'd be down for another round, even.

But as she opened her eyes, she noticed a slightly forlorn look on Darren's face.

"Y-You okay?" she asked.

"I'm in trouble," he wheezed, brushing his nose against hers. He was trembling.

"W-What? Why?"

Darren had to tell her. He had to lay it all on the line. Someone had once told him if it was said during sex, it didn't count – but he thought that was bullshit. Here he was at his most raw and most vulnerable. It made the most sense to be honest.

"I think I'm falling in love with you."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Andy leaned his back against the outside wall of the Tavern, as Doni dipped his head down to light his cigarette. Even though he hated it when Doni smoked, he couldn't deny the fact that it kicked up the hot factor – which put Doni into a category that just wasn't fair for the rest of mankind. He couldn't tell if he was mad at Doni for the disgusting habit in general, or if he was mad at how badly it turned him on to watch Doni with a cigarette.

Doni tilted his head back as he inhaled, then released a steady stream of smoke. Andy didn't even try to hide the fact that he was staring.

"Have you ever thought about quitting?" Andy asked, casually.

Doni side-eyed him. "Nope, never crossed my mind," he replied, sarcastically. When Andy frowned, Doni shook his head. "I've tried. A couple of times. But it's the only way I get a break around here."

"That stuff'll kill ya," Andy pointed out.

"Only way you'll get me to drop it is if you pry this cigarette from my cold dead fingers," Doni said, smirking. "Or, if you beg."

Andy couldn't hide his own grin. "That…sounds like a challenge."

Doni froze, not daring to look at Andy. He couldn't even entertain the thought of Andy begging. He had the rest of his shift to finish.

"You gonna do somethin' about it, McLayne?" he challenged, knowing full well he would be responsible for anything Andy did from there on out.

With a grin, Andy turned to press Doni against the wall, Andy's tall frame hovering over him. He placed an arm above Doni's head, leaning in closer. Doni looked up at him, feeling weak.

"W-What are you doing?" Doni asked, chills running up his entire body. He felt his cock twitch, and he crossed his legs slightly – doing what he could to focus on anything other than the obvious strain in his jeans or the way Andy's tongue lightly licked his lips before uttering a single word:

"Begging."

It rolled out of Andy's mouth with a heat Doni had never heard from him before. Something in Andy had shifted over the last few days and there was this enticing new confidence in him that Doni couldn't help but feel a little bit responsible for. It was incredibly sexy.

"Drop the cigarette, Doni."

Two could play this game. The corner of Doni's mouth turned upward, defiantly. He took another drag, blowing the smoke directly into Andy's face.

"Ah-ah! I think I said -"

"*Please.*"

Doni's knees buckled and he slid a few inches down the wall. The cigarette fell from Doni's lips and Andy deftly moved his foot to stamp it out before Doni could react.

"Good boy."

Andy surprised even himself – he didn't know why he said it, but it felt appropriate in the moment. Despite being the one who put them in this position, Andy panted lightly, his heart racing. He was in uncharted territory – and he liked it.

Doni was not about to back down. He pulled himself back up to full height with half a mind to grab Andy's hand to show him just what those two words caused – his dick raging against the confines of his pants, longing for release. While Andy was testing new waters, Doni was in his element, and he would teach him a thing or two before the night was over – if given the chance.

"Listen here, *sir,*" Doni drawled, his mouth only an inch – at most – from Andy's. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you enjoyed the sight of me under you."

He did.

He absolutely fucking did.

"Someone's awful *cocky*," Andy said – choosing his words intentionally. "Where has this Doni been hiding?"

Doni grabbed Andy's shirt, holding him in place. "Right in front of you, babe," he teased. "You are in danger, looking at me like that…"

Andy feigned innocence. "Like what?"

Doni trailed a hand up behind Andy's neck, and Andy's breathing hitched. Doni was just going to go for it. He would ask for forgiveness after – play it off as a joke, if he had to. But he needed to know what Andy's lips felt like.

"Andy…" he moaned softly.

Andy allowed Doni to pull his head downward. He heard nothing other than the sound of his heart beating in his ears and Doni's soft breathing. His hand landed on Doni's hip, pressing the both of them firmly against the wall. He felt something hard against his leg, and he nearly choked.

H-Holy fuck – Doni was hard.

But so was Andy.

And they *both* noticed.

"DONI!"

Ro's voice rang out into the cold night air from the propped-open back door. Doni turned his head quickly, dropping his hand.

"Break's over, buddy! We're slammed – I need you to get back in here!"

Doni sighed, but Andy didn't move. He knew what they were doing was a bad idea, but Doni seemed into it. Was he imagining that? And why did Andy want it? He and Cynthia had been on the rocks, for sure, but – they were still together. He couldn't be doing stuff like this.

Not yet at least.

"That's my cue…" Doni groaned, slinking out from under Andy. "Tough luck, mate."

Andy gaped at him, amused, as Doni disappeared back inside.

Doni knew he couldn't work as turned on as he was, and he needed to handle the situation before he went back behind the bar. He stopped at the end, flagging Ro over.

"Jesus Christ! Why were you guys out there for so long?" she asked, looking stressed.

"I need you to cover for me for like five minutes," Doni told her. "I'm so sorry."

"What?" Ro looked annoyed. "Why?"

"I just…" Doni glanced toward a door near the foosball tables. "I – I need to use the bathroom."

Ro picked up on the situation a little too quickly. Her irritation grew to intense frustration. "You've got to be *kidding* me. Are you fucking *hard* right now?!"

"Just let me handle it, okay?" Doni whimpered. "I – I promise. *Five minutes*."

Ro grit her teeth. "You have *three*. Go. And wash your fucking hands."

Doni darted toward the bathroom and Ro sighed heavily, shaking her head. Andy appeared from the back door, looking both cold and flustered. As he took his spot at the end of the bar, Ro leaned in toward him.

"What the hell were you two doing out there?"

Andy was caught off guard by her accusatory tone. He tried to keep himself collected. "We were just talking," he answered, vaguely.

Ro crossed her arms, her expression clearly indicating that she didn't believe him. Andy shifted awkwardly on the stool, looking around for a rescue from this conversation.

"Where'd Doni go?"

"He's *working*, Andy," she said, a little more intensely than she intended. "He's grabbing some stuff for me from the back. I think you'll be fine for a few minutes."

Andy nodded and tried not to notice when Doni finally emerged from the bathroom a couple minutes later, his face glistening. He went back to work, avoiding looking at Andy directly. Andy watched him, knowing full well what Doni had just done. He hid his smirk behind a glass of whiskey – thoroughly proud of himself.

When Andy got home, he kicked off his shoes and shuffled into his bedroom, not at all surprised to see Cynthia already asleep in bed. He pulled off his shirt and changed into a pair of flannel pajama pants before he froze.

He sniffed at the air and turned around to face Cynthia. An unfamiliar scent filled the bedroom – a cologne that Andy didn't recognize. He reached for Cynthia's laundry, discarded by the end of the bed, and brought them up to his nose.

Yep. Definitely cologne. And an expensive one at that. His stomach turned as he scowled, tossing the clothes back on the floor. He knew exactly who it belonged to.

Not mad – considering how his evening had gone – but still annoyed, he moved back to the living room where he turned on the TV and sighed. He and Cynthia needed to talk. Clearly, they were only delaying the inevitable, and at this rate, they would end up hating each other if they didn't address it soon.

But the cologne? Why was Cynthia so close to someone that their cologne would linger on her clothes? His mind reeled with the possibilities – each as unlikely as the next.

Cynthia wouldn't cheat, he insisted to himself.

Guilt panged in the pit of his stomach as he realized what he was thinking – and the double standard he'd set. He'd almost cheated tonight. He wanted to kiss Doni. He wanted to do *more* than that with Doni. And this wasn't the first time.

Andy wasn't struggling with his sexuality, as many back home would likely think if he ever openly talked about it. He'd been attracted to men and women for as long as he could remember, but growing up where he did – it wasn't exactly easy for him to explore that.

He knew he liked Doni. He knew that what he felt every time another guy approached him at the bar was jealousy. He knew that it was wrong to feel possessive over someone who was not his. Not while he was in a relationship with someone else. Not when he wasn't out publicly.

But Doni was exciting. He was beautiful and kind and clearly had to have *some* interest in Andy. He'd jacked off in the bathroom after their moment in the alleyway. And they hadn't even *done* anything.

Andy's heart thundered – even as he just sat on the couch thinking about him – every time he pictured Doni's eyes. He wanted to hold him close, let their hands explore, feel his soft lips along his neck. Andy moaned involuntarily, his hand slipping inside his pants.

Before he grabbed hold of himself, the phone next to him buzzed.

You get home alright?
I'm sorry I didn't really get to say goodbye.

Andy grinned, chewing on his bottom lip as he typed a quick response.

It's okay. I'm home.
Sorry about making things weird.

You didn't. I promise.

You home?

Yeah. You going to bed?

Not yet. Not tired.

Me neither.
You wanna watch something together?
Stephen King marathon on channel 17.

Andy grinned and changed the channel to 17. He was not a huge fan of horror movies, but he liked the idea of watching something with Doni, even long distance. He grabbed the throw blanket from the back of the couch and snuggled down, holding his phone close.

Which one is this?

1408. It's so fucking good.

Samuel L. Jackson? Nice.
Oh fuck, John Cusack.

Just wait til the end.

Hey - can I Facetime you?

Of course.

Andy's hands shook a little as he clicked on Doni's name and the dial tone sounded – Doni's face appearing moments later. He was shirtless, too, but Andy tried not to focus on that.

"You look snuggly," Doni commented with a faint smile. "It's cute."

"This couch is pretty comfy," Andy told him. "I fall asleep here more than I'd like to admit. Especially lately. You in bed?"

Doni nodded. "Yessir."

"You gonna get mad if I ask too many questions during the movie?" Andy asked. "Because I don't usually do horror. And I'm not that smart."

"Fuck off," Doni snorted. "You're smart."

"Not if you ask Cynthia," Andy joked. "I do a lot of dumb things. Not sure why she's put up with them for so long."

Doni's face fell a little. "Where is Cynthia?"

"Asleep," Andy said, with a small roll of his eyes. He wanted to tell Doni he thought Cynthia might be cheating on him, but his own shame got the better of him, and he decided to keep his thoughts to himself.

It would almost be easier if she *were* cheating on him, and he hated that he thought that way.

They stayed on the call for most of the duration of the film, Andy asking questions every time something weird happened. Doni never once responded with: 'just watch the movie!' which he had grown so accustomed to. Cynthia hated it when he talked during movies. It was a valid pet peeve, he had to admit, and couldn't fault Cynthia for getting annoyed, but Andy was just curious. He couldn't help it.

"Who gave John Cusack the right to be that hot?" Andy asked without even thinking.

Doni grinned, his eyes sparkling. "That your type?" he teased. "Older men?"

Andy realized what he'd said and blushed, pulling the blanket up closer to his face.

Obviously not, he wanted to say. He knew Doni was at least a year younger than he was. Playing it safe, he refused to answer the question.

As the movie reached its climax, Andy noticed Doni's eyes closing. He smiled fondly, watching the half-dozed boy on the screen more than whatever chaos was happening in room 1408.

"Hey…" he said softly, waking Doni. "I'm gonna let you go so you can get some rest, okay?"

Doni rubbed his eyes and groaned. "F-Fuck, I'm sorry. I didn't realize I was falling asleep. I – I smoked when I got home. Usually knocks me out."

"It's okay," Andy reassured him. "Thank you for watching this with me."

"Of course," Doni said. He stared directly at the screen, a sleepy smile breaking out on his face. "We should do something tomorrow. Er, well, today. If you're free later."

Andy loved that idea. He needed to get away from the house this weekend. He didn't want to think too hard about his decision with Axis – although he intended to call Reid as soon as he woke up.

"Yes," Andy agreed. "I would love to do something with you. Text me in the morning?"

"It's already morning, Andy…"

"Well, like – *morning* morning. When you wake up," he explained.

Doni grinned. “So, like three in the afternoon.”

Andy laughed. “Whatever works best for you. Just call me. I have to work, but you know where to find me.”

Doni nodded. He didn’t want the call to end, but he really was going to pass out soon. He waved at Andy, sweetly.

“Goodnight, Andy.”

“Goodnight, Doni.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The next morning, Cynthia made her way into the kitchen, surprised to see Andy already awake and dressed. He stood by the sink, leaning against the counter, typing away on his phone. She watched him carefully as he smirked, chewing on his thumbnail as he read something on his screen.

Thanks for making me finish the movie alone.
Really fucked up of you.

Sir, it is before noon.
Don't you know I'm trying to sleep?

I don't get it.
Did he ever get out of the room?
Gave me nightmares.

Awww, too scary?
I'll be sure to hold your hand next time.

Don't make promises you can't keep.

"Good morning," Cynthia said loudly, announcing her presence.

Andy didn't acknowledge her. He was still a little pissed about the cologne. And, admittedly, he was also little distracted by his phone.

Doni sent him a selfie – he was curled up with a pillow, his eyes half-lidded and drowsy as he flipped off the camera. His usually styled curls were a mess, falling into his face, twice their normal volume. Andy's heart raced – finding himself jealous of the pillow. He wanted nothing more than to rest sleepily against Doni's neck.

Cynthia cleared her throat. "So, we're not speaking now?" she asked.

This time, Andy mumbled a: "Good morning" in return but didn't look up. Cynthia frowned. She wanted to know who he was texting.

"You didn't come to bed last night," she pointed out. "When did you get home?"

"Late," Andy replied, shoving his phone in his pocket. "You were already asleep. I wasn't tired, so I watched a movie and then ended up passing out on the couch." He didn't mean it, but he added a short: "Sorry."

Cynthia stared at him, but Andy's expression was difficult to read. It was cold – a stark contrast to how it had looked only moments before when he was staring at his phone. Cynthia's suspicions rose.

"We should talk about the Axis article," she said bluntly. They couldn't avoid it forever and she was tired of the growing tension and silence in their household. It was time.

"It's fine," Andy said with a small shrug.

"Did you read it?"

Andy nodded. "Read it. Watched the interviews. Spoke to Reid. I did my research." He made very intentional eye contact, keeping his voice level. "Everything *you* would have done."

Cynthia was, reluctantly, impressed. "And?" she prompted. "Did you make a decision?"

"I did," Andy confirmed. "I called Reid this morning. I'm taking the deal. I want this."

Cynthia couldn't say she was surprised, and in all actuality, there was very little the article could have said or done to change Andy's mind. There was only one thing left for them to address.

"I understand," Cynthia said, drawing a shaky breath. She hugged herself and rubbed the side of her neck as she gathered the courage to say the thing she'd been trying to say for the last week. "Andy, I can't – I can't go with you. And if I'm being brutally honest – I don't think I can do long distance either. I know how important all this is to you, but my job is important, too."

Andy stared in silence.

"W-What I'm trying to say is…" she continued.

"Are you breaking up with me?" Andy asked.

Cynthia twisted her hands together. "No!" she said quickly, before realizing that was a lie. "O-Okay, yes. Maybe. Fuck – I don't know. I hate this so much, Andy. I don't know what to do. It feels like we're holding each other back and I just -"

Andy looked at the wall, crossing his arms. "Could this conversation have waited until after my shift?"

Cynthia's eyes grew wide. She felt even more like an asshole. It was Saturday – she knew it was Saturday – Andy was up earlier than usual because he had to work.

"Oh my God," she said, horrified. "I'm so sorry, Andy. I – I didn't realize you were working today."

"You were the one who told me to pick up more shifts," he said, bitterly. He felt ashamed that he was mad at her – he knew he shouldn't be mad. She was right to say what she said, but still – it sucked being broken up with, even if he knew it was coming.

"I'm sorry, w-we can talk about it later -"

"I'm gonna go."

Andy crossed over to the doorway, reaching for his jacket and keys.

Cynthia broke, panic coursing through her. "Andy, wait!" she shouted after him, reaching for his arm.

Andy turned back slightly. "Cyn, we can talk about this later. I need to go to work."

"I'm sorry - !"

Andy pulled his arm from her grasp and left, slamming the door shut behind him. The second he was out of sight Cynthia collapsed to the floor in sobs. She couldn't breathe. She knew all of this was inevitable, and yet, her whole body ached with the loss of everything they'd been working toward for years.

Shaking, she reached for her phone and called the only person she thought might understand.

"Hey, you!" Darren's voice sounded from the other end of the line. "You miss me already?"

"D-Darren," Cynthia managed to get out through her sobs. "C-Can I come over? Please?"

Darren's pleasant tone disappeared instantly, replaced with concern. "Whoa – is everything okay?"

Cynthia shook her head, almost dropping her phone. "N-No – I think – I think I just broke up with Andy."

"Oh, babe…" Darren sounded genuinely sad for her. "Alright, I'll come get you. Everything's going to be okay. Just wait right there."

"T-Thank you…"

Half an hour later, Cynthia sat, curled up with her knees against her chest, on Darren's couch. He handed her a small cup of tea, which she accepted, graciously and took a sip.

"I'm so sorry that I'm such a fucking mess," she apologized, wiping a stray tear from her eye.

Darren settled down on the other side of the couch. "Please. Don't apologize. You're going through a lot right now. I understand."

Cynthia took a deep breath, clutching her mug tight. "You know what the worst part is?" she said. "He doesn't even seem upset. L-Like. He was just – n-numb to it. Like he didn't even care." She sniffled loudly. "I don't know when he stopped caring about me. T-That's the part that fucking sucks."

Darren chose his words very carefully – fully aware how unconventional their

situation was. Here he sat, trying to comfort the girl he was in love with – the girl he'd just had sex with less than 24 hours before – while she sobbed over her breakup.

"I don't think he's stopped caring about you, Cyn. I just think – maybe he doesn't know how to respond. Right now, at least. Maybe it hasn't quite hit him, yet." He pulled a knee up on the couch, resting his elbow on it. "Do you want to work things out with him?" he asked, hesitantly.

Cynthia shook her head. "No," she said, as confidently as she could muster in her current state. "A-At least, I don't think so. I think we're too far gone – like, *I'm* not even upset about the breakup, honestly. I'm upset because I feel like I've lost my best friend. I want him to talk to me. I want him to tell me what he's feeling. I want him to be angry and suspicious as to why I'm not around as much anymore. L-Like *notice me*. I need *something* from him."

As Cynthia shook, Darren reached out and took the mug from her, setting it down on the coffee table. He extended his arms, and Cynthia accepted the gesture, crawling into his lap as he embraced her.

"I – I know our relationship is dead," she mumbled. "Mine and Andy's. It's been dying for a long time, and we were just too stubborn to see it. I think you get to a point in a relationship where you feel like – you've invested so much time in someone that you can't possibly let it fail. Because then you've wasted so much time. Time you're never going to get back. L-Like – it wasn't *bad*. We loved each other. We were comfortable and safe – we just weren't *thriving*." She nuzzled her face into Darren's elbow. "I know we both deserve better. I just…I can't imagine him not being in my life at all. I h-hate the idea of that."

Darren rested his head on hers. "Maybe the friendship is still salvageable," he said. "Maybe the distance will actually be good for the two of you to grow as your own people."

"We're supposed to talk more tonight," Cynthia told him. "Once he's out of work. I just – I just hope -" Her voice trailed off as she struggled to figure out what she was saying. "I – I don't know what I hope, if I'm telling the truth. I'm so sorry – I know you don't want to hear all of this."

Darren looked down at her. "What did I say about apologizing?" he asked, taking a deep breath. "The only part about this that worries me – while we're both being honest – is, well, after last night, I kind of thought that you and I were gonna…you know."

Cynthia chewed on her lip, her eyes filling with tears once again. She had thought the same thing, and now she worried that he was having second thoughts. She couldn't possibly lose both Andy and Darren on the same day. She wouldn't be able to handle it.

"Was that stupid of me?" he asked, genuinely hurt. He laughed, sadly, answering his own question. "Yeah, I guess it was. I should have waited until all of this was resolved. Until you were in a better place with everything. I – I know that I can't expect anything from you right now. That's not fair."

"Darren…" Cynthia said softly.

Darren cupped the side of her face, turning her to look at him. "Look," he said. "I like you, Cynthia. I could see something serious with you. I am hoping that we could *be* something serious someday. I just – I can't get a read on you. I have no idea how you feel about me."

Cynthia launched herself forward, kissing him. He didn't respond in the way she had expected, and pulled back, laughing nervously.

"Does that clear it up a little?" she asked, hopeful.

Darren remained serious, shaking his head. "Not really," he said. "Explain it to me like I'm an idiot."

Cynthia thought this was a fair ask. "I like you, Darren," she admitted. "I like you way more than I should like you. I want to be with you. I like the person I am when you're around. I know we went about this all wrong, I know we should have done all *this* back when we kissed the first time. I should have told Andy everything. Ended it then."

Darren had to agree, but it would not have been his place to say so at the time.

"I l-love the feeling I get when I'm around you," Cynthia said, finally smiling. "I haven't felt that in a really long time."

Darren nodded, satisfied with this response. After a brief silence between the two of them, Cynthia ventured to make sure they were on the same page.

"I-Is that clearer?"

"Yes," Darren said softly, leaning in to kiss her.

Cynthia shifted as they kissed, straddling his lap. As his hands slid up her back,

raising the fabric of her shirt – and then back down, resting on her ass, Cynthia whimpered and moaned against him.

"I want you…" she mumbled between kisses. "I want you. I want you…"

Darren heard her loud and clear. He laid her back on the couch, his lips tracing along her neck. As she clung to him tightly, he brought his mouth to her ear.

"Say the word, babe – and I'm yours."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Andy had no interest in mopping floors, or changing out the soda bags, or ringing up old men for their Pall Malls or their chew. Instead, he scrolled through Cynthia's social media, almost obsessively, trying to figure out how he was going to break this news to his family and to their friends back home. He hadn't even told them about his record deal, yet.

The chime over the door sounded and Andy jumped as Doni entered the store.

"Hey!" he said, surprised. "What are you doing here?"

Doni nodded to the phone in Andy's hand. "Oh," he said. "So, your phone *is* working."

"What?" Andy looked confused.

"You stopped responding to my texts," Doni explained, stepping closer to the counter. "I worried I might have said something wrong. Then I remembered you were working, so I figured I'd just pop in and check on you. Everything…okay?"

Andy's heart beat a little faster. Something about Doni being worried about him made him feel better. "Oh," he said, a little embarrassed. "S-Sorry – no, you didn't do anything. I was just dealing with…" he fidgeted, looking down at his phone. "I uh – I think Cynthia broke up with me this morning."

Doni had to keep his face still, despite wanting to smile so badly. "Oh?" he said, strained. "S-Shit. Are you alright?"

Andy hesitated before answering. "You know," he said with a nervous laugh. "The fucked-up thing is…yeah? I'm actually totally okay. And I know I shouldn't be. M-Maybe it'll hit me later, but – she said it, and I was like: okay, cool, I'm gonna go to work now."

Doni swallowed. "M-Maybe it's…for the best?"

"Yeah, maybe," Andy entertained the thought. "She doesn't want to go to Del Luna anyway. This was probably inevitable."

Doni leaned gently against the counter. Andy could smell his cologne and the faint sting of cigarette smoke. He tried to keep himself focused.

"Maybe you'll meet someone in the city," Doni suggested, doing his best to remain casual.

Andy's breath caught in his throat as he gaped at Doni. Doni didn't think that did he? He thought it was obvious - if Andy wanted anyone else, it would be him. Even Andy couldn't ignore that anymore.

"Yeah, I don't really know if I'm…*looking* at the moment," he finally said.

Doni allowed himself a smile. He brought his eyes up to Andy's, pleased to find Andy looking directly at him. "S-So, about later…"

The door to the back room burst open and Nadine came out, stopping abruptly as she saw Doni at the counter.

"Am I interrupting something?" she asked.

Doni and Andy exchanged amused glances.

"Listen, if you're just gonna sit around and flirt, you can do it on your own time," she said, annoyed. "Not while I'm paying you."

Andy scoffed. "*You* don't pay me." He didn't deny the flirting. Something Doni noticed immediately.

Nadine rolled her eyes. "You know what I meant."

"To be fair, you don't pay me either," Doni pointed out. Andy had to stifle a snort.

"And he's a customer!" Andy added.

"He's not buying anything!" Nadine argued.

"Of course, he is," Andy reached for Doni's brand of cigarettes from the wall behind him. "Pack of smokes, and uh – a Coke, right, Don?"

"Sounds good to me!" Doni flashed a smirk in Nadine's direction. "See? Customer."

"Oh my God," Nadine was over it. "Andy, just go home. We both know you don't want to be here. Take your little *boyfriend* and go."

Doni spoke up first. "Hey! Go easy on him – he just had his heart broken!"

Andy mocked offense, playing along. "Yeah, Nadine! I got my heart broken!"

"Then go wallow in self-pity on someone else's dime!" Nadine exclaimed. "Anywhere, but here."

Andy paused, thinking it over. Nadine had a good point, and an even better idea. Andy's mouth twitched upward as he started around the counter.

"You know what," he said slowly. "I think that sounds like a plan. Even better? I quit."

Both Nadine and Doni looked up, stunned.

"Wait, what?" Nadine's expression fell instantly.

"Yeah, no – I think I'm done here," he said, slinging an arm around Doni's shoulders. "I'm leaving for the city soon, anyway. So, I quit."

As he and Doni started out the door, Nadine shouted after them, demanding to know what Andy planned to do about his next shift. With a sarcastic wave, Andy declared that it was no longer his problem.

In the parking lot, they both burst into fits of laughter. Andy felt an overwhelming sense of freedom. He was so close to being able to do whatever he wanted – pursuing both the life and career he'd only ever dreamed about.

"I have no idea why I didn't think to do that sooner," he said, beaming. "I mean, I still need the money, but I feel so much better being out of there." He pulled Doni closer. "Thank you – for having my back in there."

Doni nodded, smiling just as widely. "Of course."

Andy came to a stop, turning to face him. "I have a dumb request," he said. "An idea for something we could do today. I – I mean, I don't know how fun it would be for you, b-but…" He rubbed his arm nervously. "I'm entering this new era of my life, right? New job, new city, new – *Andy*. Right?"

Doni picked up on where Andy was going with this, giving his head a shake. "Are you going to ask me for a makeover?"

"Don't laugh at me!" Andy said, his cheeks turning red. "I just think I should find something to wear that isn't plaid. I'm moving to the Valley – I need to fit in."

"And you're coming to *me* for help?" Doni looked confused.

"Doni," Andy said. "You are literally the hottest guy I know – respectfully, and you know what – fuck it, *disrespectfully*."

Doni had to look away or else he'd kiss Andy full on the mouth right then and there. "Geez, Andy," he said. "If I knew you felt that way about me, I would have -"

"I'm being serious," Andy interrupted him. "Help me look hot."

"You don't need my help with that," Doni said.

"I'm flattered," Andy said, placing a hand on Doni's shoulder. "Truly. But please."

Doni looked up and smiled. "Fine. Let's go."

"Now *this* is what I'm talking about!" Andy turned in front of a mirror, showing off a teal and orange silk shirt Doni picked out for him. He paired it with tapered dress pants that hugged Andy's body in all the right ways.

Doni watched, enjoying the view – not even aware he'd been staring at Andy's ass for a solid five minutes. Andy caught his eye in his reflection and ran a hand through his hair, biting his lip.

"On a scale of one to ten, how hot do I look?"

Doni's eyebrows shot upward. "You're asking me?"

Andy rolled his eyes. "No, the girl at the counter," he said, sarcastically. "Yes, you. Scale of one to ten."

Doni crossed to him slowly, his fingers tracing the front of Andy's shirt. "You're always a ten," he mumbled, sheepishly. "What if we just…" he undid a couple of Andy's buttons, opening the collar a little. "There. Show off a little – holy shit, you are smooth. No chest hair at all?" He peeked down into Andy's shirt, curiously.

Andy shook his head, laughing. “Ginger,” he said. “Enjoying the show?”

“Shut up,” Doni said, not denying it. He reached up and brushed Andy’s bangs out of his face. “There,” he added. “Now I – I mean, *we* – can see your eyes.”

Andy kept his gaze on Doni, smiling fondly. “We still have to find something for you.”

Doni rolled his eyes and wandered off to a rack near the front of the store. He pulled a black shirt and vest combination from it, along with a pair of dress pants like Andy’s, and disappeared into a dressing room. As he stepped back out, Andy choked.

“Fuck,” he breathed, louder than he realized.

Doni grinned, fixing the cuff of his sleeve as he marched over to Andy. “I never get to dress up like this,” he said. “Do I look okay?”

Andy couldn’t form words. His eyes darted down to Doni’s collar, a thick patch of chest hair peeking through. Doni took this as a good enough response.

“My eyes are up here, sir,” he said with a wink.

“Fuck you,” Andy turned suddenly, embarrassed.

“Maybe,” Doni replied, turning on his heel. “Buy me a drink first.”

Andy choked as all the blood rushed to his already tight pants. He was pretty sure he didn’t hear a single word the cashier said as they paid for their outfits - deciding to leave wearing them and shoving their old clothes into bags provided by the store. They took their time making their way back through the mall, both trying to figure out how to spend more time together – as if they really needed an excuse.

“We should go out tonight,” Andy suggested.

“What?” Doni looked surprised.

“We should go out. For drinks or something. I don’t want to go home yet – and we look really good. Let’s go somewhere.”

“You’ve been single for a few hours, and you already want me to wingman for you?”

Andy sighed. “That’s *not* what I was suggesting…”

“Doni?”

A third voice cut into the conversation, and Doni froze. Andy turned to see a tall man standing behind them, his eyes fixated on Doni. Aside from Doni, he was probably the second most attractive man Andy had ever seen – and he was sure he’d seen him before. His dark wavy hair was perfectly groomed, and he wore a square set of glasses that he adjusted nervously.

“W-What are you doing here?” he asked.

Doni hid slightly behind Andy’s lanky frame. “Last I checked, I still live here, too,” he said, coldly.

The man sighed. “That’s not…ugh, you know that’s not what I meant,” he said. “I mean, you didn’t go to Shelly’s baby shower today. People were asking about you.”

“I called Shelly,” Doni said, keeping his voice steady. “I told her I wasn’t coming.”

The man gawked at him, his irritation growing. “So, you called Shelly, but you didn’t call me?”

Doni dropped his voice low, glancing sideways at Andy. “Can we not do this right now?”

The man stepped forward. “*You* called *me* in the middle of the night, Doni. I was fucking worried about you. And then you go radio silent? The least you could have done was send me a text or – or -” he released a frustrated sigh. “I’m not – l-look, I’m not doing this anymore. *Y-You* were the one who wanted distance, okay? This was *your* idea. You can’t keep calling me whenever you’re -”

Doni spoke quickly, stopping him from finishing his sentence. He didn’t need Andy to know that Doni called his ex when he was horny and just needed a fuck.

“I’m not asking you to,” he snapped. “I – I’m sorry I worried you. I’m fine – I – I swear, I’m fine.”

Andy finally put two and two together, figuring out this had to be the ex that Doni had told him about. That’s where Andy had seen him before – he’d been at the Tavern, kissing Doni goodbye. He felt a hot flame of jealousy shoot up through his stomach.

Erik turned his attention to Andy, holding out a hand to introduce himself. “I don’t think we’ve met,” he said. “I’m Erik.”

Andy took his hand skeptically and shook it. “Andy,” he replied.

Erik stopped mid-shake, suddenly going rigid. His eyes flashed and he glanced at Doni. “Andy?” he said, making sure he’d heard him correctly. “Andy. T-This is Andy?”

“Erik…” Doni warned.

“Wow,” Erik said, stepping back – exasperated. “A-And you two are – what – *together* now?”

Doni opened his mouth to respond when he felt Andy’s hand slip into his own, squeezing it gently.

“What if we are?” Andy asked coolly.

Doni leaned into him. “Andy, you don’t have to -”

Andy kept his focus on Erik. “Is there a problem?”

Erik shook his head quickly, holding his hands up in submission. “No,” he said. “Nope. No problem here.” He looked at Doni, a little hurt. “I’m…glad you got what you wanted, I guess. Sorry to interrupt your date.” He turned back to Andy. “Good to meet you, Andy.”

Andy didn’t quite know what to say. “Y-Yeah,” he said reluctantly. “You too.”

Erik hesitated before turning on heel and retreating across the food court. Andy watched him curiously before turning to Doni, who looked embarrassed and anxious. Andy squeezed his hand again, trying to get Doni’s attention.

“H-Hey,” he said, softly. “Hey – s-so that was -”

“My ex-boyfriend,” Doni explained, keeping his eyes low.

“Yeah, I got that much. Doni, what’s going on? That was kind of…weird. Are you okay?”

Doni sniffled and wiped his eye, fighting back tears. “It’s fine,” he insisted. “I’m *fine*. Can we please get out of here? I need to get out of here.”

Andy nodded, still gripping Doni’s hand as he led him out of the mall.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The sun was starting to set, painting a beautiful shade of purple and orange along the skyline. Despite being in the middle of nowhere, Danville was particularly beautiful at dusk. Sitting on the edge of town was a small bed of raised rock. Andy had only been there a few times before, but Doni insisted it was his place to go and think, so that's where they went.

In the center of the bed of rock was a natural pool, surrounded by the tiniest bit of grass. They walked alongside it, hands still clasped, as Doni finally started to calm down. Andy didn't want to push for more information, especially while Doni was feeling vulnerable, but he couldn't help but be curious about the nature of their relationship. It didn't sound as "over" as Doni had implied before.

"…So, are you going to tell me the story about this Erik guy?" he asked. "Is he giving you trouble? Do I need to call in some backup?"

Doni shook his head, frowning. "No," he said. "No, nothing like that. Probably the other way around, honestly. It's uh – f-fuck, this is – it's messy."

Andy stopped, turning Doni to look at him.

"Tell me. Please."

Doni gripped Andy's hand tight, drawing a deep breath. "Erik and I dated for like… three years? He's…great. Really great. I think this was the first time I've even seen him get jealous. Things were good. We were…serious. Like, really serious. Like, talking about marriage and kids – all of it. He's everything I ever wanted in a partner. But…I fucked it up."

"What happened?"

Doni let go of Andy's hand and continued walking, rubbing the back of his neck.

"I met someone," he replied, intentionally vague. "I met someone, and I fell head over heels for him. I never believed in love at first sight until it happened to me – a-and I became, I dunno – obsessed? When I wasn't around Erik, I didn't think about him at all. I just thought about this other guy. All the time. Did anything I could to see him. Fantasized about him when I definitely *shouldn't* have been. It was so bad. A-And Erik didn't deserve that. So, I did what I thought was the right thing to do – and I ended it."

Andy understood exactly where Doni was coming from. He heard his own story in Doni's and suddenly felt a little less alone.

"I don't think that means you fucked it up," Andy said, trying to alleviate some of his own guilt at the same time.

"Yeah, well," Doni disagreed. "You're the only one who thinks that way. I mean, you've seen the guy! All my friends thought I was stupid. For leaving something *real* for something that just – wasn't ever going to work out." He heaved a sigh. "I uh – I tried to distract myself after it ended. Keep my mind off Erik – keep my mind off – t-that other guy. B-But it was hard. And I was r-really fucking lonely. So, I started calling Erik again, and we were fine being casual, but I know that wasn't fair either."

This made sense based on Erik's reaction. Andy could tell there was some lingering hope in the way Erik looked at Doni. Andy wanted to know if there was any hope on Doni's part.

"I know he thought we were going to get back together. So, I ended it entirely, like – a m-month ago? And I've been avoiding him ever since. Our friends have been asking a lot of questions, but I've been avoiding them, too." He looked down. "I know how awful that all sounds…"

"I'm not judging you," Andy assured him.

Doni looked up, a bit relieved. He wasn't the only one.

"What about this other guy?' Andy continued. "He treatin' you right?"

Doni stared at him; a little surprised Andy hadn't caught on. "N-No," he said, awkwardly. "I – I don't think he likes me like that."

Andy half-shrugged. “His fuckin’ loss.”

Andy crossed to the pool and picked a spot on the grass to sit down. Doni followed him, settling down close by. A few minutes of silence passed between them as they both looked out at the town below, picking absently at the dying flowers.

“C-Can I ask you a personal question?” Andy broke the silence. His hands shook as he tried to find the right way to approach the subject.

“Sure.”

“H-How…did you know…that you were….”

Doni smiled. “Gay?” he asked.

Andy nodded.

Doni pulled his knees close to him and hugged them tight. “I think I’ve always known,” he said. “But I think I was – I dunno – seven? I had a crush on my best friend, and it never once occurred to me that I wasn’t supposed to have crushes on other boys. Until I was older and, well - teenagers aren’t the nicest people. I came out to my dad when I was fourteen – I think he already knew, but he was great. I remember being so scared, and now I don’t even know why. He’s always been the best support I could ask for – with anything I did. He would do pretty much anything for me.”

Andy was thankful for that. He didn’t know if his own parents would be supportive in the end. If he ever told them the truth.

“And your mom?” Andy asked.

Doni winced. “She died when I was six. Cancer. I don’t remember her that much; other than she really loved music.” He looked up at Andy. “I think you would have loved her. She was so cool. She also loved mythology. That’s why she named me Adonis. I remember her telling one of our neighbor kids: ‘His name is Adonis. Not Doni. I named him Adonis.’ She would be so upset if she knew.”

Andy leaned against him. “For the record, I think it’s a great name.”

Doni smiled weakly, nudging him back. “Thank you,” he said. “My Dad and I moved here shortly after she died. He couldn’t stay there. Everything reminded him of her. He never remarried. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him go on a date. Just kind of rocked the single Dad role until I moved out. Maybe he’s dating now. It would be good for him, I think. He’d deserve it. I’m…I’m so thankful for him. I’m able to be who I am as freely as I am, because of him.”

Andy noted that he would thank Doni’s Dad for that if he ever had the chance to meet him.

Doni eyed Andy curiously. “Are you…thinking about your…preferences?”

Andy laughed, his cheeks turning a shade that put his hair to shame. “Doni,” he said, shortly. “I was a football player. It took about ten minutes in a locker room for me to realize that *maybe* I wasn’t entirely straight.”

As Doni released a loud laugh, Andy felt a weight lift from him. He’d never said the words aloud – never thought he would have to – but there was something freeing in doing so. He was thankful to feel safe enough to talk about it with Doni.

“Well, I guess that would do it!” Doni said, unable to hide his happiness over this news. It was the confirmation he’d been looking for the whole time. Even with all their flirting, he’d never been certain. “That explains your obsession with my piercings.”

Andy’s jaw dropped. “They’re hot! I admitted it!”

“I know, I know,” Doni said, taking Andy’s hand in his. He pressed his fingertips against his, tenderly.

Andy trembled, watching their fingers touch. “I’ve never d-dated a guy before,” he admitted. “Never done *anything* with a guy. I don’t really like -”

“Labels. Yeah, I remember.”

“I just like people,” Andy explained. “If that makes sense? Like, if we vibe – we vibe. I didn’t really have any interest in anyone until I met Cynthia. And even that was totally unexpected. She and I never would have worked in the real world.”

Doni looked at him, confused. “What do you mean?”

“We met at a party. She was a friend of a friend – and somehow our paths never crossed. And if her roommate hadn’t ditched her – I don’t think they ever would have crossed again. I offered to walk her home, and we just clicked. But, if we weren’t in that little forced friend group – I’m not sure we would have clicked the same way. Forced proximity kind of thing.” Andy paused – much of his and Cynthia’s relationship suddenly making sense to him.

“Maybe that’s why all this is happening now. Real life is catching up with us. Those differences that didn’t matter back then actually matter now.”

Doni let him process this realization and reclined back in the grass. Andy followed suit, surprised when Doni rested his arm under Andy’s head before it hit the ground. He allowed Doni to pull him close, snuggling together. Andy absently played with the fabric of Doni’s vest, listening close to the sound of his heartbeat. Doni’s hand covered Andy’s and Andy felt his throat tighten.

“Doni…” he whispered.

“Mm?”

“Do you think – if we met under different circumstances -” Andy panicked, changing his mind. “F-Forget it.”

Doni propped himself up, turning to face him. “No,” he said. “Go on.”

Andy shook his head, embarrassed. He shouldn’t have even started to ask, because the way Doni had him pinned to the ground told him everything he needed to know. He wasn’t moving until Andy confessed.

“It’s not fair for me to ask…” he said, looking up at Doni.

Doni felt uncharacteristically brave in this moment. He was nearly on top of Andy, and the look in Andy’s eyes was painfully familiar. It mimicked the look in his own.

“I *really* want to know the second half of that question,” Doni murmured.

“You sure?” Andy’s voice was barely audible.

Doni nodded. Andy touched the side of his face and Doni leaned into his palm. They were on the same page – he was sure of it now. All he had to do was lift his head. Just a couple of inches.

“Doni…” he sighed.

Just as they had in the alley behind the Tavern, Doni brought his mouth close to Andy’s – waiting for him to make the final move. As Andy closed his eyes, Doni felt a vibration in his pocket.

Buzz, buzz.

“Fuck,” Doni said, turning his head. “S-Sorry.”

He scrambled off Andy, pulling his phone out of his pocket. Ro’s name flashed across the screen, and he grumbled, not looking back at Andy.

“It’s Ro. I have to take this.”

“Thanks again, Ro…” Andy muttered under his breath.

They were so close – again. He wasn’t imagining it anymore. Doni wanted this. And Andy knew it was irresponsible for them to do anything about it, especially when he didn’t quite know what was happening with him and Cynthia, but God – he needed to try. He needed to know what it felt like. What Doni felt like.

Doni answered his phone, trying not to sound annoyed. “Hey, Ro.”

“Where the hell are you?!” Ro’s voice sounded from the speaker, making even Andy jump.

“I’m with Andy,” Doni admitted “Why?”

“Uh, are you not coming to the party?” Ro asked.

Doni looked confused. “Party? What party?”

“Gemma’s birthday party!”

Doni slapped a hand to his forehead. He’d completely forgotten they were shutting down the Tavern for the night – a big deal on a Saturday – to celebrate Gemma’s birthday. He had promised he’d be there.

“Shit,” he said. “I forgot – I’m so sorry. Tell Gemma I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing and get your ass over here, *now*,” Ro insisted. “Literally everyone is here. Even Erik.”

Doni chose to ignore this detail. Of course, Erik would be there – he was still friends with Ro and some of the others – but Doni didn’t want to see him. He had his fill of Erik for the day.

“Can I bring Andy?” Doni asked, shifting his focus.

Ro sighed. “Why do I feel like you’re going to bring him either way? What is going on with the two of you anyway? Why are you -?”

Doni got to his feet, cutting her off. “Great. Awesome. We’ll see you in a little bit.”

“Doni, wait -”

Doni ended the call and turned to Andy, reaching down to help him get to his feet.

“You want to go to a party?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Large groups of people gathered in front of the Tavern and in the streets, dancing and laughing – most carrying drinks. This was a perk of living in a small town – the police were fairly lax if you were at least within the vicinity of a bar with an open beverage. A heavy bass thudded from the music blaring inside the Tavern and lights flashed in the windows.

Andy had never seen the place so busy. As they pushed their way through the crowds and approached the door, Doni clung to Andy's hand.

"Stay close," he said. "Please."

Andy agreed. He didn't know anyone other than Doni and the rest of the Tavern staff. He had no intention of leaving Doni's side or letting go of his hand.

As soon as they entered, Doni noticed that all the tables had been pushed to the walls, making room for people to dance. Ro caught sight of them right away, making her way over.

"There you are! Finally!" she said loudly, fighting to be heard over the music. "Hey Andy – good to see you! What were you two…" she stopped short, her eyes falling to their hands. "…up to?"

Doni shrugged casually. "Just hangin' out. S-Sorry, we lost track of time. Where's the birthday girl?"

Ro glanced around the room. "Oh, she's around here somewhere," she said. "You'll hear her yelling, eventually. She's…"

"Trashed?" Doni raised an eyebrow.

"That's putting it lightly," Ro commented. "You two want anything to drink?"

"I know where to find it," Doni assured her. "You said Erik's here? Have you seen him?"

"He's outside with some guy he brought with him," she said, gesturing toward the door. "You two gonna be good or do I have to keep you separated?"

Doni shook his head. "No, we'll be fine. We ran into him earlier. It was…fine. Why is he even here?"

Ro sighed. "He's still our friend, Doni. But that certainly explains the rebound boytoy. Please play nice – for Gemma's sake."

With a short nod, she made her way toward the bar, waving eagerly at a group of people by the back door. Doni rubbed his thumb against Andy's, almost nervously, as he turned to face him.

"Y-You want a drink?"

"Y-Yeah," Andy said. "I could go for a drink."

Doni led Andy toward the bar, pulling two beers from a small fridge. They toasted to each other and smiled nervously as they drank. Doni's eyes wandered to the dance floor. He wanted to dance with Andy so badly and wondered if he'd gather up the courage to ask him. They'd almost kissed, after all – a dance should be nothing.

Doni turned, surprised to see Erik approaching them, a stunning blonde man close in tow. He half-debated pulling Andy into the kitchen where they could be alone, but instead – stayed still. He could handle this conversation.

"H-Hey. Can we talk for a sec?" Erik asked.

Doni nodded.

"I'm sorry about earlier," he said, calmly. "I didn't mean to – *you know* – get all possessive and jealous and shit. I was just worried – when you didn't call. I thought maybe something had happened to you."

"I shouldn't have called you," Doni croaked. "It wasn't fair. We had our agreement, and I broke that. *I'm sorry*."

He meant it, and he hoped Erik believed him.

"Are we…good?" Erik looked unsure.

"Yes," Doni said.

Erik turned to Andy. "And are we…also good?"

Andy had no intention of ever speaking to this man ever again, even if he hadn't wronged Doni at all. But, sure, Andy thought he could be civil, if need be.

"Sure," he answered, simply.

"You uh…" Erik hesitated. "You take good care of him, okay?"

Doni, annoyed, spoke up. "Erik, he doesn't -"

"I will," Andy said, resolutely.

Erik turned to his blonde guest and nodded toward the crowd, escorting him back to the door. Doni barely had a moment to apologize to Andy, before their presence was interrupted a second time – this time by a burst of very drunken energy.

"THERE YOU ARE!" Gemma slung an arm around Doni's neck, her speech slurred. "I've been lookin' all over for you two. Listen – shh, shh, shh – L-Listen!" she pressed a finger to Doni's lips, shushing him. "I have a bet with Ro – and I'm not gonna lose it, alright? So, I'm gonna need the two of you to take one for the team and hook up, okay? Tonight. Got it? Cool, cool, cool."

Doni looked startled, trying to make sense of what she was saying. "W-What?" he asked, laughing nervously.

"For my birthdaaaaaay!" She pulled Andy close as well. "Please? She thinks you guys will take longer to get together, but I think it should happen like – right fuckin' now. So – *go!* Smooch! Bang! Please and thank you."

Doni and Andy looked at each other, both unsure what to say. Doni's eyes pleaded with Andy to take the lead, but Andy couldn't help but be on Gemma's side.

"You're smashed, Gemma!" Doni finally accused, trying to wriggle himself out of her grip.

Gemma released them both, backing up a little. "Hell yeah, I am! And you need to get on my level! Go get another beer. Imma go dance. Later, babes! And remember what I said!" She made a wildly inappropriate gesture before turning back to the crowd, throwing her hands up in the air.

Andy watched her dance in awe and amusement. "I…love her. Remind me to tip her better in the future."

Doni tried to compose himself, thoroughly flustered. "Y-Yeah," he agreed, albeit reluctantly. "S-She's great."

An uncomfortable silence fell between them. Andy downed the rest of his beer, and Doni followed suit, his eyes wandering back to the swarm of people dancing. He was annoyed that Ro and Gemma had a bet – if it was true – but that also meant other people saw it as well, which enhanced his confidence slightly.

"Look, Doni – if you -"

"Dance with me."

Their voices overlapped and both insisted the other go ahead with what they wanted to say. Andy backed down, encouraging Doni to repeat himself, unsure he'd heard him correctly the first time.

"Dance with me," Doni echoed.

"I'm a terrible dancer," Andy admitted, averting his eyes.

It wasn't that he didn't want to dance with Doni. He wanted to, desperately, but he knew he would likely make a complete fool of himself.

"I don't care," Doni reassured him. "I want to dance with you. Come on. Please?"

Andy placed his beer bottle down on the bar and followed as Doni took his hand once more. They ended up in the very center of the dance floor and Doni placed his hands on Andy's hips, slowly moving to the beat of the music. Andy awkwardly two-stepped, moving his hips ever so slightly. Doni couldn't help but laugh.

"You weren't kidding," he said, tossing his head back. "For a musician, you have *terrible* rhythm."

Embarrassed, Andy stopped and turned to leave. "I'm not doing this."

"No!" Doni pulled him back, pressing himself against Andy. He dropped his voice low. "Please. Let me show you."

Andy bit his lip. He was sweating. Doni had to notice how sweaty his hands were. There was no way this ended in anything but disaster.

"Follow my lead," Doni said, pressing his lips to Andy's ear. "Move with me."

His hand fell on the small of Andy's back as he started to guide him. It took a few minutes for Andy to find the rhythm, but once he did, everything fell into place. He just had to let himself relax – which was a very difficult thing to do with Doni so close.

With every drop of the beat, Doni rocked himself against Andy, his hand staying on Andy's lower back to keep him in rhythm. Andy's breath caught in his throat as Doni's lips neared his own. He wanted Doni to kiss him – he'd felt it all day – longer than that, even, if he was being honest with himself, and if Doni didn't do it soon, Andy felt like he might crack first.

They found their movement together, Andy draping one arm over Doni's shoulder, and the other holding him just as Doni did, his hand curled on Doni's back. It didn't take long for rhythmic rocking to turn into grinding, and Andy's eyes rolled back as the music and his heartbeat thundered wildly, his pants growing tighter with the increased friction between them. He knew he was in danger, but he didn't want Doni to stop.

It felt so fucking good, and Andy was convinced there was no way Doni didn't know what he was doing to him. He *wanted* to feel this – feel *all* of this – Doni, their bodies moving together, the noticeable bulge in Doni's pants, the music, the elation of the alcohol and heat – and –

"O-Oh, fuck!"

The whimper was involuntary. Doni's mouth had grazed the side of his neck and Andy had nearly lost all control. It was all Doni needed to snap back to reality, realizing what he'd done. Andy's face turned a bright shade of red as Doni stepped away, rubbing his neck anxiously.

"I – I think I'm gonna go for a smoke," Doni said, avoiding eye contact. "I uh – I need some air."

Andy nodded. "Y-Yeah," he replied gruffly. "I'm gonna – I'm gonna use the bathroom. I'll meet you outside."

Doni nodded and darted for the door, while Andy made his way into the bathroom. Once inside, he locked the door quickly and turned the faucet on high before releasing the button on his pants and shoving his hand inside. He'd never been more thankful that the dive bar had private stalls than when he grabbed hold of himself and gave two long strokes, doubling over the sink in temporary relief. He thought of Doni's body – his mouth – his lips, pressed *everywhere* – he wanted to cum to the idea of being inside him – yanking his pants down eagerly and bending him over the bar – hearing him whimper Andy's name as they –

"S-Shiiiit…" Andy moaned loudly, his knees nearly buckling as he released his grip. He looked up at his reflection in the mirror, embarrassed and a little ashamed, his face flushed and drenched in sweat. He didn't want to do this here. He didn't want to jerk off in the bar bathroom. He needed to go home where he could take care of himself properly.

Shaking, he lifted himself into his waistband, in hopes of hiding his erection. Still not convinced he was concealed; he untucked his shirt and washed his hands before returning to the crowd. He would just say goodnight to Doni quickly and hurry home.

Outside, Doni drew several long shaky drags from his cigarette, nearly jumping when Ro appeared next to him. He avoided looking directly at her, knowing exactly what kind of lecture was brewing under the surface.

"I don't want to hear it," he said to her.

"You don't even know what I was going to say," she replied coolly.

"Nothing I haven't heard already before," Doni muttered.

"You're going to get hurt," she told him. "Even if he does like you – and after that little stunt on the dancefloor, I'm…a little more convinced – but, *even if he does like you*, this will not end well. He's *still* got a girlfriend. That's still a mess you don't want to deal with."

"I'm dealing with it, Ro," Doni turned to her, frustrated. "A-And I think they broke up."

Ro cocked an eyebrow. "Think?"

"They broke up," he said resolutely, his arms firmly crossed. He kicked at a spot on the porch, dropping his head a little. "I love him, okay?" he mumbled. "He's worth the mess. I know what I'm doing."

Ro stared back at him, her face softening a little. "Do you really? Love him, I mean?"

Doni took another drag from his cigarette before nodding reluctantly. "Y-Yeah. I

do." His voice quivered as the weight of his confession sank in and he looked up. "I do, Ro."

Ro frowned, crossing her own arms. "I won't fight you on this anymore," she said, softly. "I don't love it, because I'm worried about you. But, if that's how you truly feel – dammit, dude, fight for it. You gotta tell him, though. Before it's too late."

She looked over Doni's shoulder, spotting Andy approaching.

"Speak of the devil," she said, crossing to him before he reached Doni.

"H-Hey, Ro," Andy said, noticing the serious look on her face. "Everything okay?"

"You listen here," she said, crossing her arms angrily. "I don't know what's going on with the two of you, but all I have to say is – if you *hurt* that boy – I swear to God, I will be on your ass *so fucking fast*, McLayne. Do you hear me?"

Andy, confused, glanced over at Doni leaning over the railing before turning his attention back to Ro. He could tell she was seething. He had no intention of ever hurting Doni, nor did he understand why she thought he would.

"Yes, ma'am," he agreed with a nod.

Ro sighed. "Good. Go get him."

Andy watched as Ro disappeared back into the bar and slowly made his way over to Doni.

"Y-You know there's an irony in needing some air and polluting your lungs, right?" Andy ventured, giving a nervous laugh.

Doni turned his head slightly toward Andy. "Y-Yeah, yeah. Sorry about that. It got a little hot in there. Needed to cool down."

"Yeah, you're uh…" Andy joined him, mimicking his stance against the railing. "You're telling me." He eyed Doni's cigarette, nodding at it. "C-Can I have some of that?"

Doni quirked an eyebrow, shooting him a sidelong glance. "You don't smoke…"

"No, I don't," Andy said. "But I'm kind of craving one right now."

Doni didn't hand the cigarette over. Instead, he kept it between his fingers and placed the butt of the cigarette onto Andy's lips – almost feeding it to him. Keeping his gaze locked with Doni's, Andy inhaled, the way he'd seen Doni do it so many times before. He only coughed lightly, exhaling a slow stream of smoke. Doni bit his lip and returned the cigarette to his own mouth a moment later, nodding in approval.

"Like a pro," he commented.

Andy couldn't bring himself to speak. He stared, fixated on the way Doni's curls bounced around his eyelashes, the way his fingers locked around the cigarette, and how the cigarette lingered on the edge of Doni's perfect lips. Andy found himself jealous of the cigarette - longing to exist on that pout. For Doni to be tasting him instead.

Without realizing what he was doing, Andy did what he feared he would do.

He cracked.

His hand cupped the side of Doni's face, turning it to meet his own. His lips landed on Doni's mouth and Doni's eyes shot open wide in shock. Andy was kissing him. They were kissing, hard, and every fantasy Doni had ever had about this exact moment cycled before his eyes. Realizing he wasn't hallucinating or crazy, Doni leaned back into it – only for Andy to immediately pull away in a panic.

"F-Fuck," he said, his heart pounding away in his throat – not believing he'd actually done it. "F-Fuck, Doni, I'm sorry – I didn't -" Andy backed away from the railing, his hands covering his face.

"Andy, no – stop -" Doni protested.

"I'm so sorry, I don't know why I –"

Doni dropped his cigarette, crushing it beneath the toe of his boot before following Andy. He stepped in front of him and pulled Andy's hands down, forcing his attention.

"Stop…" Doni breathed, laughing nervously. "I'm not upset. Obviously, I'm not upset – Andy, c-come on – be so for real for a second - it's okay. Look at me…"

Andy panted softly, his eyes desperate and hungry. "Y-Yeah?"

Doni nodded eagerly, holding his face tight. "Y-Yeah," he said, beaming. "Y-You fuckin' dumbass. I wanted you to do that so badly." Doni stood on his tiptoes to bring his face up to meet him. "F-Fuck, Andy. I'm…I'm going to kiss you back. Is that okay?"

Andy drew several deep breaths, not blinking as he searched Doni's eyes for any sign of insincerity. A lie. A bet. Too much alcohol. *Anything.* Finding nothing but the same aching longing he'd felt for so long, he nodded, his voice almost pleading in response.

"Y-Yes…"

Doni hesitated for only a second before pulling Andy down to kiss him again. This time, Andy didn't hold back, an intense ferocity sparking between them. It was as though they thought the only time they had was now, here in this moment – and they were running out of minutes quickly. Andy grabbed Doni by his waist, shoving him hard against the wall. He reached his hand up behind Doni's neck as his mouth opened wider, deepening their kiss.

Doni whimpered, his tongue slipping into Andy's mouth, which made Andy's brain short-circuit. Andy could taste the cigarette, the beer, the faint remnants of Doni's peach lip balm – he was intoxicating, and Andy was starving. Doni gripped Andy's shirt, pulling Andy flush against him. Andy slid a knee between Doni's legs and Doni felt himself go weak, his hips rolling forward. Andy could feel Doni's hard cock against his leg and his brain flooded with every possible thing he wanted to do about it – everything he wanted to do *to* it.

They both completely forgot about the party raging around them until someone drunkenly killed the mood with a loud:

"Oooooh! Get it, Doni!"

Andy and Doni only broke apart slightly, both gasping for breath. They laughed, their eyes locked, pressing their foreheads against each other.

"W-We should m-maybe find somewhere more private," Andy suggested.

"What – like a closet?" Doni smirked.

Andy shook his head, chuckling. "No, smartass, j-just… somewhere we can do this without an audience."

Doni looked around. Hardly anyone was paying attention, but he understood where Andy was coming from. He, too, wanted the alone time. For whatever reasons Andy had in mind.

"C-Come with me," Doni said, pulling Andy along.

Andy didn't ask questions, gripping Doni's hand tight as they raced down the street, away from the noise and the crowds.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

They ran, their sweaty palms gripped tightly together, nearly a block before Doni guided them down a side road. The apartments lining the street were worse for wear; cracked brick and overloaded dumpsters, broken bicycles and children's toys strewn across dying patches of grass. Andy had never been this way before, but he realized as they approached a tall building with a small card table on the porch, that they were in Doni's neighborhood. Doni started up the metal stairs and Andy noticed the ashtray full of cigarette butts on the table.

Sheepish, Doni pulled out a set of keys and started to unlock the door. Impatient, Andy slid his arms around Doni's waist. Doni moaned softly, the keys nearly falling out of his hands.

"This is your apartment?" Andy asked quietly.

Doni nodded, trying to ignore the fact that Andy's fingers were slowly working the button on Doni's pants. "Y-Yeah," he said, glancing anxiously at his neighbor's door. "It's not much, but – you know, it's mine."

Andy turned him around, pushing him against the door and kissing him once more. Doni released a nervous giggle as Andy let his hands fall to his ass, his lips now sucking lightly at a spot just under Doni's chin.

"A-Andy!" Doni gasped, squirming against him. "Andy – b-babe – l-let's take this inside."

Andy finally pulled away, grinning. "What? Afraid your neighbors might see?

Doni leaned close to him. "*You* were the one who didn't want an audience," he taunted.

Andy released him, admitting defeat. Doni opened the front door and led Andy inside a tiny dimly lit apartment. Dark wooden panels lined the walls, which Doni had covered in a series of music and movie posters. A comfortable couch sat by the front door, covered in blankets and a collection of sweatshirts, and a tiny kitchen peeked out from behind a staircase leading to the second floor.

Andy listened for any indication of a second occupant. "You…got any roommates?"

"Not anymore," Doni said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Erik moved out a few months ago."

Ah, yes. Andy thought. *Erik*.

Andy nearly jumped when Doni took his hand and slowly led him toward the stairs. "Come on up," he said. "My bedroom is this way."

His bedroom. Andy swallowed as the reality of their situation settled in. Doni was leading him to his bedroom, where they would probably make out and maybe take their clothes off and –

Fuck.

Maybe.

The second floor consisted of only an open-concept bedroom and adjacent bathroom. More posters plastered the walls, along with a large bookcase and a good-sized television. On the floor in front of the TV, Doni had two bean bag chairs, several stacks of video games, an open box of Cheez-Its, and a bong. Andy grinned while Doni apologized for not cleaning up before bringing him over.

"It's okay!" Andy insisted, his eyes scanning the room. "I love this. It's cozy." He froze, noticing a small poster on the wall by Doni's bed. "Wait a second. Is that…me?"

Doni's smile vanished, his face immediately turning red. "I – I collect show posters from t-the bar," he stammered quickly. "It's just – I just –"

"I don't know," Andy taunted as he looked around, grinning. "I don't see any other posters from the bar. Just me."

"It's my favorite," Doni mumbled.

Andy crossed to him, grabbing his hips. “How long have you had a crush on me?”

Doni averted his eyes, ignoring how fast his heart was racing. “Seriously, I just liked the poster…”

Andy raised an eyebrow. “Doni.”

Doni sighed, biting his lip. “A…A long time now. It’s… been a bit of a problem for my personal life.”

Something finally clicked for Andy, and he leaned back just a tiny bit. “Wait. A-Am I the guy from the Erik story? Am I who you left Erik for?”

Doni didn’t respond. Andy tried to wrap his mind around the thought of anyone leaving *Erik* for him.

“B-But you said you were in love with…” Andy trailed off; unsure he understood. He dropped his voice low, his expression softening as realization dawned on him. “Oh my God. D-Doni…”

Tears pricked the corners of Doni’s eyes as he shook his head, visibly anxious. Andy could see his hands shaking.

Doni drew a deep breath. “T-This is the part I always fuck up. I bring guys home, I bring them up here – we have sex, and then I…I never hear from them again.” He peeked at Andy, his brown eyes glimmering. “I care about you way too fucking much to let that happen this time. I don’t want to fuck this up. Not with you.”

Andy touched the side of his face gently. “You won’t,” he reassured him. “I – I’ll be honest, I don’t know what I’m ready for tonight. L-Like, don’t get me wrong – I *really* want to fuck you. B-But this is all very, very new to me and it’s a little scary.” He turned Doni’s face to look at him. “I just need you to know that I *want* to be here. With you. P-Please know that this is mutual.”

Doni nodded; his voice caught in his throat. Andy smiled, his thumb caressing Doni’s cheek.

“Can I kiss you? Please?”

Doni nodded again, his breath hitching as Andy brought his lips down to meet him. Andy’s stomach did a flip as Doni linked his fingers through Andy’s belt loops and yanked him forward, nibbling lightly on his bottom lip in the process. In return, Andy’s hands landed at the bottom of Doni’s shirt, and he waited for permission to remove it.

“Go ahead,” Doni breathed, raising his arms up as Andy yanked it over his head.

Andy stared in slight awe. It wasn’t anything he’d never seen before – but having it all right in front of him was a totally different story. Being able to *touch* Doni the way he’d only ever fantasized about. He carefully traced the lines of Doni’s chest, eliciting a full-body shudder as he touched the cold metal through his nipples tenderly, admiring them with a look of intense lust.

“See something you like?” Doni asked, peering up at him. He already knew. He’d asked the question before. He just wanted to hear Andy say it.

“Y-Yeah,” Andy managed to get out. “G-God, you’re so fucking hot…”

“My turn,” Doni commented, reaching for Andy’s shirt.

Andy flushed and covered Doni’s hands with his own, before he could lift the shirt away. Doni frowned.

“H-Hey, it’s okay,” he said quietly. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. I’m sorry, I -”

“No, no!” Andy said quickly, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’m just – I – f-fuck…” He shifted nervously. “I-I’ve got a little problem – well, not *little* – b-but, *you know*. And I t-think this is only going to make it worse. And I don’t really know what to do about it, because I don’t want you to feel like I’m…just u-using you f-for that…”

Doni’s eyes widened as he understood. “Fuck, Andy,” he said with a dangerous grin, pulling Andy’s shirt up a little. “If you’re hard, you could have just said something. I can help you take care of that…” Andy winced as the tip of his cock peeked out from his pants, just grazing Doni’s hand. “Do you want me to touch you?”

Andy couldn’t look at him. Obviously other people had touched his dick before – he shouldn’t have been nervous about it - but experiencing it with Doni, who certainly knew more than he did, was intimidating. It was like he was a teenager all over again, fumbling awkwardly, figuring things out. He wanted Doni – *all* of Doni – even if he didn’t quite know where to start.

All thoughts of Cynthia left his mind – they had broken up, after all, right? Still – he

wanted to take things slow. Doni wasn't the only one who didn't want to fuck things up.

"Y-You don't have to…" he stammered.

Doni's hand moved along the bulge, tracing the outline of Andy's shaft and finally settling at the tip, teasing it lightly. Andy sucked in a sharp breath, feeling a shudder course through him.

"I said," Doni whispered, locking eyes with him. "Do you want me to *touch* you?"

Oh God, yes. Please.

"P-Please," Andy whimpered.

Doni pulled Andy's shirt off and Andy kicked away his shoes while they started to undress. As Andy dropped his pants, he looked up and nearly choked at the sight of the jockstrap Doni had been hiding under his outfit.

"Holy shit," he breathed

Doni looked confused. "W-What?" His fingers hooked through the straps, ready to pull it off when Andy reached out to stop him.

"Turn around," Andy demanded.

Doni grinned, doing just that. The way his ass was displayed was enough to send Andy into cardiac arrest. Andy couldn't help but stare.

"Were you *planning* on getting laid tonight?" Andy asked, amused – his hands holding tight to Doni's hips.

Doni bit his lip. "I mean," he shrugged. "Doesn't hurt to be prepared, right?"

Andy felt a fleeting sense of jealousy. "Me or Erik?"

"You…" Doni wasn't lying. "Always you."

This answer was good enough for Andy. His fingers traced the straps, snapping one playfully, eliciting a beautiful gasp from his partner.

"C-Can I turn back around now?" he asked.

Andy pressed himself against Doni's back, his cock nestling perfectly between those immaculate butt cheeks. Doni tilted his head back slightly as Andy kissed his neck, humming softly against his skin.

"Not yet," he moaned into Doni's ear.

Doni allowed Andy to hold him like that for several minutes, goosebumps running along his arms as they took a moment together. Feeling Andy's heartbeat thundering against his shoulder blades, Doni reached down and pulled one of Andy's hands against his chest – showing him that he wasn't alone in that feeling.

"Y-You said something about me being your queer awakening…?" Doni whispered, turning his face toward Andy's.

"Oh, I'm awake." Andy buried his face in Doni's curls, holding him tighter. "I'm fucking *wide* awake…"

Finally allowing him to turn around, Andy insisted on helping Doni finish undressing. Once fully exposed, they paused for a moment to look each other over – dissolving into a slow kiss; their hands groping eagerly.

It was Doni's turn to appreciate Andy's physique, his eyes glittering with admiration. Unlike Doni, Andy had nearly no body hair, but his pale skin was smattered with constellations of freckles. Doni touched them gingerly, a delicate look of adoration donning his face.

"You're not so bad yourself, you know," he said, kissing along Andy's collarbone.

Andy gasped, feeling his already rock-hard cock twitch with every touch of Doni's lips.

"Y-Yeah?" Andy didn't believe him. Ever since the accident, he had struggled seeing anything attractive about himself. He had large scars on his legs and back – in addition to his broad shoulders and slender hips, which always made him feel so disproportionate. He knew there had to be *something* Cynthia liked about him – but he assumed it was his personality. Maybe his sense of humor, at best.

"You're beautiful…" Doni whispered, sucking affectionately on Andy's neck. "So beautiful."

Andy felt his entire body flush. No one had ever called him that before – and he wasn't sure he'd believe it from anyone other than Doni.

"H-Hey, before we do this," Doni's tone turned serious, pulling away from Andy only slightly. "God, fuck - this is embarrassing, but I…I have to ask. J-Just to be safe. Have you been tested recently?"

Andy looked confused. “Tested?”

“You know…”

Andy frowned and shook his head. “N-No,” he admitted. “F-Fuck. No, not in a while. I didn’t really think I needed to. I’ve only been with -”

Doni held up a hand, not wanting to hear the end of his sentence. He knew actual sex was most likely off the table, especially now, but hearing about Andy fucking Cynthia was going to kill the mood entirely.

“I – I was tested like a week and a half ago,” Doni mumbled. “I haven’t been with anyone since. B-But I don’t have any condoms. I – I wasn’t expecting anyone -”

“It’s okay,” Andy nodded. “We don’t have to – *you know*. B-But I’m also down if you are. I’ll take your lead.”

He wanted Andy. That was Doni’s decision. He’d waited this long, and to have him, hard and ready, in front of him – Doni would do his best to resist going too far. He raised his gaze to meet Andy’s, his hands trembling.

“W-We take things slow,” he decided. “Come here.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Andy agreed with a compromise. Doni encouraged him to lay back on the bed and slid up next to him, gently taking hold of Andy's cock. Andy's head nearly shot back into the pillows as the pressure of Doni's hand rushed through him. Doni traced the head with his thumb, circling the growing pool of pre-cum, and enjoying the sounds that escaped from Andy's mouth as he did so.

"You're already making a mess," Doni taunted.

"S-Shut up," Andy whined, his eyes closing tight. "I-It's all your fault."

Doni leaned closer, giving Andy several long strokes before ducking his head down to spit into his hand, adding to the already slick mess.

"Hey," Doni grinned, hovering above Andy, provocatively. "You wanna tell Gemma she won the bet, or should I?"

Andy laughed. "I'll let you do the honors."

"What a fuckin' gentleman." Doni gestured toward the table next to the bed. "There's lube in there…" he instructed. "Can you grab it for me?"

Andy grabbed the bottle from the drawer and watched as Doni coated his hand. This time, he grabbed himself along with Andy, stroking them simultaneously. Andy lifted his head to watch, his mouth hanging slightly open in surprise.

"F-Fuck," he gasped. "Fuck - that feels so good…"

Doni panted softly, bracing himself on one elbow. "I-I know," he said. "T-Thought you might like that…"

Andy's expression softened as he reached once again for Doni's face. "K-Kiss me?" he asked, whimpering almost desperately. "Please?"

Doni obliged, happily, nearly laying on top of Andy as their cocks slid with ease through his greased hand. Andy's kissing grew more aggressive, his nerves slowly fading away with every soft whimper Doni made against his lips. He had never been more turned on in his life.

"You don't have to fuck me tonight," Doni whispered, sucking lightly on Andy's neck.

Andy moaned loudly at the thought, thrusting his hips upward. Fucking Doni's hand was great, but he couldn't help but imagine what it would feel like to be inside him. "W-What if I want to?" he asked.

"Soon," Doni promised. "Not tonight, but as soon as it's safe –" He gave a small groan. "I'm going to ride you like a fucking horse."

Andy sucked in a sharp breath. "O-Oh, so we're doing this again, then?"

"You're not getting away that easy." Doni nipped at Andy's neck, leaving large marks.

Andy groaned, tilting his head to give Doni better access. He loved the idea of Doni being so possessive. Doni's tongue trailed from ear to chest, savoring the glimmer of sweat adorning Andy's bespeckled skin.

"You fucking tease."

Doni's hold tightened and his pace slowed – the sounds flowing from Andy's parted lips thoroughly out of his control. He knew he was going to explode and soon if Doni kept it up like that.

As if he could read Andy's mind, Doni released the hold he had on both of them and kissed down Andy's stomach, settling himself between his legs. Andy propped himself up to watch as Doni dragged his tongue along the length of him. Doni made sure to make eye contact as he hovered at the tip, taking just the tiniest bit of him in his mouth. Andy nodded eagerly, encouraging Doni to continue and shuddered, releasing several loud expletives as his cock disappeared down Doni's throat.

Andy gripped the sheets tightly, his chest heaving as Doni sucked and teased, pausing only to jerk him off, watching Andy writhe underneath him with intense amusement and hunger.

It was better than either of them could have imagined. Doni, who had once been anxious to even speak around Andy, thrived off the sounds he managed to pull from his lover, his confidence rising with every moan and whimper. Andy, who had always been dominant in sexual situations, loved being at Doni's mercy for a change. He laid himself back as the pressure built, knowing it wouldn't be long before he –

"Haaaa – s-shit, o-oh fuck – oh fuck, I'm gonna cum – D-Doni - !"

Doni worked Andy through his orgasm, cleaning the messy load with his tongue. Wiping his mouth, he crawled back up to meet Andy, who draped an arm over his red face, embarrassed.

"What are you hiding from?" Doni teased, trying to make his way under Andy's arm.

"You," Andy laughed, his voice muffled by his elbow. "L-Look what you d-did to me…"

Doni beamed, proudly, glancing at Andy's waist where his cock lay in lifeless submission. Andy dropped his arm, bringing his hand to Doni's jaw. He peered up at him, both spent and enamored. Doni leaned his face into Andy's hand, kissing his palm gently.

"You're incredible, you know that, right?" Andy said softly. "I am just so…"

He stopped. Saying what he wanted to say was a bit much for their first night together, but it didn't stop him from feeling it. He had never felt so strongly for *anyone* before. It was terrifying.

Doni gazed down at him fondly, doing his best to ignore his own throbbing problem. As Doni shifted, Andy felt it against his leg, and he snapped back to reality.

"My turn," he teased.

Blood rushed to Doni's face as he covered himself with his hand, as if he were going to be able to hide his excitement.

"No, no," he said, no longer exuding the confidence he'd had only moments before. "No, I – I can take care of it. You don't have to do that -"

"I know I don't have to, baby, I *want* to," Andy said, lifting himself to kiss Doni reassuringly – grinning a little as he noticed a distinct salty taste now lining Doni's tongue. "Please," he breathed against him as he reached to move Doni's hand. "Let me…"

Doni slowly made eye contact with him, his expression softening. "W-What did you just call me?"

Andy hadn't even thought about it. The word just slipped out, naturally. When Andy didn't respond, Doni held the side of his face, pressing his forehead to Andy's.

"D-Do it again," Doni pleaded.

"*Baby*…"

The word was barely audible, but it was enough to send a shiver through Doni, who melted against him. As Andy carefully rolled him onto his back, Doni kept an arm locked around Andy's neck, their lips desperately fused together. Andy's hands traced Doni's body, resting at his hips – his eyes fixated on the tension in Doni's abs.

Doni bit the end of his finger as he watched Andy look him over. He'd never seen anyone look at him with so much awe – and Doni had been with his fair share of partners.

Andy's eyes followed every single tattoo on Doni's skin, his fingers lightly palming the muscle. He ran his tongue over his bottom lip eagerly as he reached for Doni's thick cock, doing as Doni had – spitting into his hand before taking hold of it. Doni maintained Andy's gaze as a low moan rolled out of him, his back arching slightly.

"That feel good?" Andy asked, genuinely worried he might be doing something wrong.

Doni nodded quickly, giving off a small whimper. "Y-Yes," he gasped. "Y-You're d-doing great."

Andy felt his own cock jolt again at Doni's praise and he gasped. Andy knew they wouldn't take it further, but rocked himself against Doni as he touched him, his mind once again diving into the thought of being able to fuck Doni properly.

Doni's hands stretched upward, reaching for the edge of his headboard. He gripped tight, savoring the riding motions. Andy cupped the underside of Doni's ass as he lifted his hips to meet Andy's.

"I want you to think of me fucking you…" Andy instructed, knowing full well he was creating an even bigger problem for himself, as he started to swell once again.

In truth, he wanted Doni to beg for Andy to fuck him. A request he knew he would never be able to turn down.

Doni gasped in surprise, his eyes fluttering closed as he did what he was told – he thought of Andy slipping inside him - of Andy bending him over as he buried his face in his pillows, biting at the fabric case to drown out his moans.

"F-Fuck – I-I'm supposed to be in charge tonight!" He whined, already dangerously close.

Andy smiled, giving his head a small shake. "Not right now you're not," he said. "Look at you thinking about me filling up your tight little –" His own breath became shallow as Doni moaned, unhinged, begging for Andy to let him finish.

"J-Jesus fucking CHRIST, Andy - p-please – f-fuck – o-oh my *GOD*," Doni whimpered, tossing his head back. Andy's free hand cupped and tugged gently at Doni's balls. He grinned widely at the immediate desperate response. "Shit – *shitshitshit* - I'm g-gonna cum, babe – oh my God, p-please…"

"Not yet," Andy commanded as he lowered himself, struggling a little with his long legs. He felt a twinge of pain run up his thigh but powered through. Doni whined impatiently at the sudden disappearance of Andy's grip and Andy beamed. This was so worth any ache he would feel later. "Tell me if I'm doing this right, okay?"

Doni lifted his head, his eyes wide as Andy slid the tip of Doni's cock into his mouth. Andy had never done this before but figured he had a good enough idea of what to do based on the things he liked. Worst case scenario, Doni would guide him through it and the thought of that turned Andy on even more. He ran his lips down the full length of him before pressing his tongue firmly to the shaft as he came back up. Doni shuddered and gasped, fisting the sheets as he felt himself losing control.

"E-Easy with your t-teeth," Doni managed to get out, panting heavily. He ran his fingers through Andy's hair, pulling gently, guiding his movement. The second Andy made eye contact with him, Doni knew he wouldn't last much longer. "G-Gentle – t-that's it – j-just like that – oh my G-God, I'm so f-fucking close…A-Andy, I'm *gonna – shhh-fuuuck*!"

Doni gave a sharp whine when Andy's tongue flitted against the tip and Andy moved his head back quickly, just narrowly missing the warm jet stream of release as it shot upward and across Doni's stomach. Andy laughed in surprise and Doni buried his face in his hands, groaning loudly.

"I'm so sorry!" Andy apologized between chuckles, rolling onto his back. "If I had known you were *that* close, I would have –"

Doni shook his head, catching his breath. "No, no – don't apologize. I don't think I've cum that hard in forever, so I'm – f-fuuuck, mate – I'm good, I'm good. G-Good job." He gave Andy a weak thumbs-up.

Andy sprawled out on the bed next to Doni as they panted heavily. Doni turned his head to face him, his curls sticking to his sweat-soaked forehead as he gave an exhausted smile.

"You feel okay?" he asked softly, reaching out to lazily stroke Andy's cheek.

Andy half-shrugged. He couldn't decide if the searing pain in his back outweighed the sheer amount of joy radiating through his body.

"Gonna hurt later," he huffed. "Worth it though. I promise." He eyed the mess on Doni's abs and glanced at the bathroom door. "Should we take a shower?"

Doni nodded, rubbing his eyes – suddenly very sleepy. "Y-Yeah, we probably should. My uh – My shower isn't big enough for two people though. S-Sorry."

Andy placed a trail of kisses on Doni's chest. "That sounds like a challenge…"

"I wish I was being sexy," Doni sighed. "But trust me. I've tried. We won't fit."

Andy gave Doni's leg a small shake and winked. "I'll let you go first, then. You're a bigger mess than I am."

"Debatable," Doni grumbled, groaning as he got to his feet. "I'll be quick, I promise."

Doni paused before disappearing into the bathroom. He turned, frowning.

"H-Hey, Andy? You'll…You'll still be here when I get out, right?" he asked.

Andy looked confused. "Of course I'll be here."

Doni didn't respond immediately. Andy could see tears welling up in his eyes, even

from his spot on the bed, and hurried to his side, pulling him into a tight hug. He realized that this was what Doni had learned to expect. A fuck and a silent goodbye.

"Stay with me, tonight?" Doni asked, his voice muffled by Andy's embrace.

Andy nodded. He had no intention of leaving at this point. Being with Doni was exactly where he needed to be – *wanted* to be. He had a lot to process and a lot he would need to tackle when reality set back in, but for now he would stay.

Doni headed into the bathroom. Once Andy heard the water running, he rummaged through his clothes for his phone. His heartbeat quickened as he fumbled a hasty text to Cynthia. He didn't need her to send someone out to find him when he didn't come home.

Got too drunk at a party tonight. Crashing with a friend.
I'm safe. Be home tomorrow.

He set the phone on the bedside table and sighed heavily. He didn't regret any of this – of that he was certain. While this was all new, his feelings for Doni were certainly not. They were something he'd been slowly growing more aware of for the last few months. He just needed this push to act on it. It wasn't exactly the most ideal way to go about it, but Andy was determined to make it right. Doni deserved that.

A few minutes later, Doni appeared in the doorway in nothing but a towel, relieved to see Andy sitting on the bed.

"Your turn," he said. "There's a towel on the toilet seat for you. Careful – when the water gets hot, it gets really hot, and -"

Andy interrupted him with a short kiss, pressing his forehead to Doni's. "It's okay, babe," he said. "I've got it."

Andy made his way into the already steamy bathroom. Doni allowed himself a small smile of relief before crossing to the bed. He picked up Andy's shirt and pressed it to his nose, breathing in the smell of his cologne. His mind reeled with the recollection of everything that had just happened, and he reached for his phone to text Ro. She would never believe him.

Lifting the phone from the bedside table, he froze as he saw texts on the screen that couldn't possibly be for him.

Baby, where are you? Who are you with?
Are you okay?
Andy, this isn't funny.
You didn't even tell me you were going out.
What do you mean you're too drunk to come home?

This was Andy's phone. Doni shook as he read over the messages a couple times before tossing the phone back onto the table. He reached for his pants, pulling the pack of cigarettes from his pocket and a lighter from his bookshelf, wrenching the bedroom window open. He lit a cigarette and leaned out into the cold night air, resting his elbows on the windowsill.

Cynthia was still a part of Andy's life, even if he'd admitted they were in rocky territory. She had told him she didn't want to move, but still - Andy didn't know what Doni knew. He didn't know she was kissing television reporters outside swanky restaurants. And Doni couldn't – *shouldn't* – be the one to tell him. Not now. Not after everything that happened.

But why did he lie? Why did he tell Cynthia he was drunk? Andy wasn't drunk. He'd had two beers, *maybe*, a while ago. Doni silently prayed Andy wouldn't turn around and blame all of this on the alcohol. He couldn't handle that excuse.

Conflicted, and a little hurt, he stubbed out his cigarette and tossed it into the road below. He removed his towel and climbed under the blankets, pretending to be asleep. A few minutes later, he heard the water shut off and Andy returned to the bedroom, surprised to see Doni already in bed.

"Tired, baby?" Andy asked.

Doni didn't respond, keeping his eyes closed tight.

"Doni?" Andy frowned.

Still silence. Andy crossed to bed and reached for the switch on the lamp. Before he turned it off, he noticed that his phone had moved and he felt his stomach turn painfully,

looking over Doni's curled up position. He tapped the screen, seeing Cynthia's texts and sighed, flicking off the light. The room was doused in near darkness and Andy slipped into bed.

He slid his arms around Doni's waist, feeling him tense up immediately. Andy pressed himself against Doni's back, kissing along his shoulder.

"*Adonis*, look at me, *please*…" Andy pleaded softly, his lips barely leaving Doni's skin.

Doni held strong, trying not to crumble under Andy's touch, his heart racing at the mention of his full name.

"Thank you," Andy whispered, his nose nuzzling Doni's ear – a final attempt to get his attention.

Doni hesitated before responding, unsure he wanted to give up his act. "For what?" he finally asked, his voice quiet.

"Tonight," Andy answered. "Everything about tonight has been…perfect. This is the most…*me* I've felt in years. I've needed this. N-Needed you."

Doni drew a shaky breath before rolling over to face him, their eyes meeting briefly before Doni snuggled up against him, resting his head on Andy's chest. He hadn't forgotten about the texts, but he didn't want them to ruin their night either. Andy wasn't the only one who needed this.

"I'll take care of everything with Cynthia," Andy told him, as though reading his mind. He pulled Doni in for a deep kiss, draping the covers further up over them. "I promise. I'm not going anywhere, baby. I'm yours."

Doni whimpered once again at the word 'baby' and kissed Andy one more time before allowing himself to drift off to sleep.

Andy rested his head back into the pillows, the smell of Doni's bodywash, mixed with the intense scent of their combined sweat still circling the room. He blinked slowly, staring at the ceiling, his mind flooding with the memory of every feeling they'd just shared for the first time. Doni exhaled a soft sigh of content, his arm snaking across Andy's waist, clinging to him tight. Andy focused on the gentle cool breeze from the now-open window, sending goosebumps along their naked bodies; the tickle of Doni's chest hair and the cold metal of his piercings against his bare skin; Doni's now limp cock resting peacefully on Andy's leg.

Andy bit his lip, unable to stop the smile spreading across his face. Everything about this felt right. His heart raced as he allowed himself to close his eyes, listening to the gentle sound of Doni's snoring. Andy tightened his hold on him, pulling Doni close enough so he could plant a soft kiss amidst the mop of curls on the sleeping boy's head.

This was peace.

The most Andy had known in a very long time.

In the morning, he would have to face the reality of his actions, and the consequences that would subsequently follow. He would have to look Cynthia in the eye and tell her what he'd done – how he felt – and watch as their future was ripped away. He would have to face coming out to his family and friends, and subjecting Doni to their inevitable barrage of questioning. He would have to decide whether it was worth it to be moving three hours away after realizing all he wanted was a life with this beautiful man, blissfully unaware of the impending drama and doom, fast asleep in his arms.

Andy sighed, sinking lower into the pillows, his hand absently caressing Doni's arm. These were tomorrow's problems, he thought to himself. Tonight was for Doni. For cigarette breath, and soft stroking, and cheap beer. For sharing this moment of raw heat and passion, however reckless it may have been, with someone who truly cared about him – *saw* him for who he really was and adored every bit of stardust he was made of.

Tonight, Andy was in love. With both himself and the boy behind the bar, and everything they had ahead of them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The next morning arrived quicker than either of them would have liked. Slivers of sun peeked through the open window as birds chirped in the distance and the soft rumble of the morning commute woke Andy from his slumber. Moaning lightly, he opened his eyes to see Doni still sleeping peacefully next to him. It took a moment for the memories of the night before to come flooding back, Andy still in disbelief that they had done any of it.

Moving closer, Andy kissed a small, exposed part of Doni's neck. Doni twitched, releasing a gentle, satisfied sigh.

"Good morning," Andy mumbled against Doni's ear.

Doni leaned back, tilting his head enough to allow Andy better access to his neck – a move Andy took full advantage of, dragging his tongue across the dark bruises – reckless souvenirs of their escapades.

"G'morning to *you*, sir…" Doni replied, rolling on his back even more to meet Andy's tongue with his own, kissing him far too sensually for this hour of the morning.

Andy reached an arm around him, pulling Doni close – pressing his hardening cock against Doni's ass. Doni gave a small wiggle, knowing exactly the problem he was causing for his partner.

"I'm not dreaming, am I?" he whispered, nuzzling his face against Andy's.

Andy smirked. "Do a lot of your dreams start this way?"

Doni gave a small laugh, his cheeks turning red. "You'd be surprised, actually."

Andy leaned in closer, his lips hovering above Doni's. "Tell me what usually happens next…" he breathed.

Doni leaned harder against him, his heart thundering. "I think you know…"

Andy closed the gap between them, nipping at Doni's bottom lip as Doni's fingers twisted into Andy's hair. Doni's breathing hitched as his eyes fluttered closed, feeling Andy's hand circle his erection, stroking him slowly.

"F-Fuck…" Doni shuddered.

"You're already hard," Andy commented, tightening his hold. He loved knowing that he barely had to do anything to get Doni this pent up.

"You're naked in my bed," Doni rationalized. "C-Can you really blame me?"

Andy shook his head, laying Doni on his back while he continued to take care of him. Still half-asleep, Doni whimpered and moaned hazily, his back arching against the mattress as he panted and pleaded for release.

"S-Slower," he instructed quietly. "O-Oh my God, Andy – I – I want -"

"What do you want?" Andy asked, keeping Doni's gaze. "Use your words."

Buzz, buzz. A loud vibration came from one of the phones on the bedside table. Both boys chose to ignore it. Doni noticed a wild patch of dark hickies along Andy's neck and grinned, proudly.

"I got you real good last night," he said, tracing them weakly with his fingers. "Y-You look so hot like this…"

"Marking your territory?" Andy asked, slowing his hand down just a bit.

"Absolutely," Doni admitted, tilting his head back. "Mine…" he groaned.

Andy kissed Doni's chest, his tongue flickering over one of his piercings. "Yours…"

"A-Andy, c-can we just -" Doni started and then shook his head, flustered. "N-Never mind –"

"Doni," Andy's voice turned into a sultry growl, his attention fixated on the look of desperation on Doni's face. He knew what Doni wanted. "Do you want me to fuck you?"

Doni nodded eagerly. "P-Please – oh my God, Andy, please -"

Andy had seen enough porn in his day to sort of know where he needed to start – he would figure the rest out as they went. Doni had given him the green light, and all he could

think of was this beautiful man completely unraveling underneath him. He settled between Doni's legs, kissing the tender skin along his thigh and Doni released a soft moan. Andy cupped the underside of Doni's knees, bending them back up toward Doni's chest.

"Oh, *fuck!"*

Andy's tongue hit its mark and Doni melted completely – ready to let Andy do whatever he wanted to him. He would have demanded Andy fuck him immediately if the phone on the bedside table didn't start to buzz a second time. Doni frowned, distracted.

"Andy," he said, trying to see which phone was ringing. "B-Babe – o-oh, fuck – I – I think that's y-yours…"

Andy didn't stop. "Ignore it," he said. "I'm busy."

Switching gears, he let Doni's legs rest over his shoulders as he took Doni's cock in his mouth. Doni tossed his head backward; a hand pressed to his forehead as he lost himself in the wave of wetness and warmth. For a moment, he forgot about the phone - until it started to buzz once again.

"A-Andy!" he sighed, frustrated. "Y-Your phone."

Andy lifted his head. "I said I'm -"

"I – I know," Doni brought himself up to a sitting position. "I know. Just answer it. W-We can finish this after – I promise. I just need you to answer it."

Andy groaned and rolled off him, sitting at the edge of the bed as he picked up his still vibrating phone. As he saw Cynthia's name flash across the screen, he noticed the twelve missed calls and twenty-seven additional text messages.

Andy, where the fuck are you?
Please don't make me call the police. You never do this.
I'm scared.
Are you home yet?
Why is your location off?
Baby, please. Don't do this. Tell me you're safe.

Andy frowned, rubbing his forehead.

"Shit," he mumbled.

Doni's stomach twisted painfully, and he turned to face the window, his back to Andy.

"It's…It's *her*, isn't it?" he asked, his voice somber.

"Y-Yeah," Andy admitted reluctantly.

Before Doni could say anything in response, Andy got to his feet and reached for his pants, quickly pulling them on. Doni turned, getting to his feet in a panic.

"W-Where are you going?"

"I – I have to go home," Andy said. "I'm sorry."

Doni shook his head violently, feeling his throat tighten. "N-No! W-Why? I thought you broke up…"

Andy didn't look at him. "W-We did. At least, I think we did. I don't know. M-Maybe I was wrong. I have to go home and deal with this. I'm so sorry. I'll call you later."

Doni scrambled to pull on his own pants, ready to chase after Andy if he had to. "You're not going back to her, are you?"

Silence fell between them and Doni felt his heart sink somewhere past his stomach. Andy started to button his shirt, fighting his own tears.

"Andy…" Doni stepped toward him, his voice shaking. "Please…"

Andy turned suddenly, panic and guilt written all over his face. "I – I don't know, Doni! I don't know what's going to happen," he admitted. "I scared her by not going home last night – s-she at least deserves an explanation. I don't know what's going to happen from there. We don't…usually fight like this. I'm – I'm not sure what she wants."

Doni stared at him, his eyes wide and desperate. "But what do *you* want, Andy?"

Once again, Andy chose silence, unsure of how to answer.

Broken, Doni trembled, a horrible realization settling in. "…You're going to pick her, aren't you?"

Andy shook his head. "N-No, I didn't say that," he insisted. "I-It's complicated, Doni. We've been together for so long and -"

"*Bullshit*, it's complicated!" Doni burst, unable to hold himself back. He felt more

hurt than angry in the moment, but he couldn't let Andy leave without a fight. "You seemed pretty confident about it last night! L-Listen, whatever you do I'll – I'll support you, but don't stand there and try to tell me that you're happy with her. Not after everything you said to me." Doni's hands curled into fists as he tried to stop his shaking. "You *felt* something – between us – I *know* you did. You said it was the most *you* that you'd felt in years. *Listen* to that feeling, Andy."

Andy knew Doni was right. Deep down, he knew things with Cynthia had been broken for longer than either of them wanted to admit. He knew they would likely never be able to fix things – at least not romantically, but he felt the need to take care of that part of his life before he brought Doni into this mess. Unable to find the right words to reassure Doni, he turned toward the stairs.

"Andy. God. *Please*." Doni's voice cracked as he called out to him. "*Don't do this*."

Andy swallowed hard, turning his head back only slightly toward him. "I…I have to talk to Cynthia," he said, low and resolute.

As Andy took a single step on the stairs, Doni rounded the end of the bed, his voice rising emotionally.

"She's cheating on you!"

The words fired through the growing tension in the room like a bullet. Andy froze, and Doni's eyes grew wide, surprising even himself by his actions. For a moment, he regretted his choice to drop this bit of information he'd been holding inside for so long – but powered through it, knowing the damage had already been done.

"F-Fuck." His voice dropped. "A-Andy, she's…she's cheating on you."

Andy turned slowly, confused. "What?"

"Cynthia," Doni continued. "Ro and I saw her. K-Kissing that guy – the one from the news. I'm – A-Andy – b-baby, I'm so sorry."

Andy stared, slowly processing this information. "When?" he asked, quietly. "When did you see them?"

Doni shrugged. "I dunno. A couple of weeks ago? Maybe. Outside Lazlo's."

Andy mouth tensed and Doni prepared himself for the barrage of anger he was certain was coming his way. Instead of yelling, Andy kept his voice level. He was upset, clearly, but above all things, he was confused.

"And you're deciding to tell me this *now*? Why?"

Doni looked down, holding his arm. "Ro said it wasn't my place to say anything," he explained.

"Y-Yeah, well -" Andy's frustration grew slightly. "Y-You should have! That's what friends do, Doni! They look out for each other."

Doni looked up briefly, the word piercing his heart. "Friends…" he said, softly.

Andy realized a moment too late what he'd said and felt his heart begin to race. He hadn't meant it like that. Doni had to know he didn't mean it like that –

"Doni, that's not what I -"

Doni refused to look at him. "I guess we're both bad at being friends, then. Because I'm pretty sure a *friend* wouldn't have kissed me the way you did. Wouldn't have…" He glanced at the messy bed where they'd been wrapped up in each other only a few minutes before. "Done *any* of the things we did."

Andy stepped forward, desperately backpedaling. "Doni, I don't regret *anything* -"

"*Get out.*"

"Doni, w-wait - !"

"Just fucking *go!*" Tears finally started to fall from Doni's eyes, streaming down his cheeks. "I – I should have known better. You're just like the rest of them!"

Andy moved quickly, his heart breaking as he reached to brush the tears from Doni's face.

"B-Baby, no – please, don't cry – I didn't mean to -"

Doni threw his hands against Andy's chest, pushing him away, viciously. "*Don't* fucking touch me!" he yelled. "*Leave*, Andy."

Defeated, Andy backed away toward the stairs. He stood in silence, watching as Doni forced himself to look at anything other than Andy, his whole body shaking as he tried to control his breathing.

Andy no longer wanted to go home. He didn't care what Cynthia was worried about – especially not after what he'd learned. He wanted to scoop Doni up in his arms, to carry him

back to bed, and to kiss him until he knew just how much Andy –

How much Andy *cared* about him.

"Let me just sort all this out," Andy pleaded. "And then I'll call you, okay?"

Doni shook his head, uttering only a single word.

"Don't."

"I'm going to," Andy insisted. "I promise. I want *you*, Doni. I want *us*. I am going to fight for us. Just wait."

It was Doni's turn to keep quiet. When he didn't respond, Andy turned and descended the stairs. Doni waited for the sound of the front door closing before collapsing to the floor in a heap.

"FUUUUUUUUUCK!"

Doni's body convulsed in sobs, his chest tight and aching as he doubled over. He had everything he wanted for less than twelve hours, and he'd already lost it all because he couldn't keep his mouth shut. Doni felt like he was splitting in half - it hurt so much. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't think. He wanted to take it all back, or even worse, disappear entirely.

"W-What did I do?" he said aloud, slamming his fists against the floor. "Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck*."

Leaning against the end of his bed, he let the pain course through him. He wanted to run after Andy, call him, tell him how much he loved him, and how much he believed they could make things work. But he knew it wouldn't make a difference. Andy needed to want those things, too – and it was evident Andy didn't know what he wanted.

"I'm such an idiot…" Doni muttered to himself, wiping away his tears.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Andy pulled into the parking lot of his apartment building and stared at his windshield. He didn't want to get out of the car. He didn't want to go upstairs, and he didn't want to talk to Cynthia. He wanted to turn around and go back to Doni's and pretend the morning never happened. He wanted to crawl back into bed and rest his head on Doni's chest; to turn cartoons or something on the television, smoke some weed, and listen to Doni explain why *Ed, Edd, and Eddy* had been a comfort show of his growing up. He wanted to feel Doni's fingers through his hair as Andy kissed his stomach gently.

Maybe they'd fuck – or just indulge in more fooling around. They'd kiss a lot, that was for sure. Andy wanted nothing more than to spend more of his time kissing Doni.

He really hoped he hadn't fucked that up.

Before he stepped out of the car, his eyes fell on the bags on the passenger seat floor. He reached over, pulling Doni's shirt from the bag closest to him. Without even thinking, he pressed his nose to it and inhaled – and almost immediately started to cry.

He missed him already. He'd been gone for at-most fifteen minutes and it felt like a century. His whole body ached to be close to Doni again. As if something essential had been ripped from his core.

Pulling himself together, he set the shirt down on the seat and forced the door open. The walk from the car to the front door felt like miles the way he dragged his feet. He couldn't hear any sound from inside but drew a deep breath before he entered.

The apartment was still, with Cynthia nowhere to be found. He peered around the living room and the kitchen, listening for any sign of motion.

"Cyn?" he called out. There was no response. "Cynthia? Are you home?"

He crossed into their bedroom, finding the room also empty. He turned and made his way to the bathroom – still nothing.

She wasn't home.

Frustrated, Andy decided to take a shower before she got back. He needed to clear his head. The hot water and steam did the trick – for the most part – but Andy couldn't shake his thoughts of Doni.

He knew what he wanted. He knew *who* he wanted.

Why had he made it sound like he didn't?

What a fucking idiot.

Once out of the shower, Andy caught sight of his reflection in the mirror and almost burst out laughing. Doni had left a significant pattern of hickies along his neck and chest. He touched them gingerly, wincing a little at the pain.

"There's no hiding those…" he said aloud, mildly amused. "Good job, Doni."

He pulled on a shirt that covered up as many of them as he could, a little annoyed he didn't own a turtleneck, despite the fact that it would have been far too hot for one anyway. Once dressed, he plopped back down on the couch to wait for Cynthia, pulling out his phone.

Doni, I'm so sorry. I meant every word.
I'm going to fix this, I promise.
I want you. Only you.

Andy's heart sank as a 'read' notification appeared on his screen, but Doni did not respond. Frowning, he opened Snapchat, curious to see if Cynthia had left her location on. To his surprise – she did. She was last at a coffee shop all the way across town, not too far from WMIS. She could be at work, he thought, but there would be no reason for her to be there. Cynthia never worked weekends.

A moment later, the front door clicked, and Cynthia entered the living room, jumping at the sight of Andy on the couch. She looked both startled and relieved.

"Oh my God, Andy!" she exclaimed. "There you are! I have been worried sick!"

Andy looked up, and she stepped closer, stopping short as her gaze fell to the marks on his neck. Her expression shifted quickly to anger.

"Where were you last night?" she asked quietly.

Andy kept his calm, leaning his elbows on his knees. "I feel like I could ask you the same question."

"I was here!" she said, defensively. "I was here, waiting for you!"

Andy didn't believe her. "If you were here all night, then why did you have to ask me if I was home yet this morning?" He paused, only continuing when she failed to explain herself. "I told you I wasn't coming home. I told you I was staying with a friend."

"I can see that," Cynthia spat, nodding at his hickies. "Did your *friend* give you those? Real classy, Andy. Who is she?"

Andy didn't answer.

"We were supposed to *talk* last night, Andy," Cynthia pressed on. "But instead, clearly you were off with some –"

"How's *Darren*?" Andy cut in.

Cynthia blinked, her hands shaking.

Andy got to his feet. "See - the funny thing is – *my* location might have been off on my phone, but *yours* wasn't. What were you doing on the other side of town?"

"I – I was getting coffee," she said.

"How'd you get there?" Andy took a step closer to her, his eyes narrowing. "I have the car. Why wouldn't you have gone somewhere closer?"

Cynthia remained stoic. She knew she was caught. She just didn't know how.

"I *know* about Darren," Andy told her. "Doni told me he saw the two of you kissing outside of Lazlo's the night of your business dinner. That's why you were so weird when you got home that night. Guilty conscience?"

Cynthia's heart sank, but not because she'd been called out on her affair. Instead, details of Andy's own strange behavior suddenly shifted into place. She didn't quite understand but had her suspicions.

"Doni…" she said softly. "So, *that's* where you were last night." She hesitated for a moment, her eyes narrowing. "Did *he* give you those?"

Andy crossed his arms, not answering the question. "This has nothing to do with Doni."

"What happened in Del Luna?" Cynthia asked, her voice rising.

She wasn't sure she believed her own theory. To her knowledge, Andy had never expressed interest in men. There had been one time she found a window open to gay porn on his computer, but she'd never dared to ask about it. And it never came up again.

But if it wasn't Doni - who else could it have been? Who else did Andy spend time with other than her? Andy wasn't the kind of guy who would go home with someone he didn't know.

"Don't you *dare* try and turn this on me," Andy fired back. He breathed heavily before calming himself down. "Is it true? About Darren?"

Cynthia tilted her head back, blinking away tears. Andy already had his answer – but he needed to hear it from her.

"Answer the question, Cynthia…" he said, tired.

Cynthia looked away. "I don't know what you want me to say, Andy," she said, defeated.

Disappointed, Andy shook his head. "Jesus Christ," he sighed. "I knew it, but a part of me still kind of hoped he was wrong. A-And here I was, feeling guilty, when you already -"

"Already *what*, Andy?" Cynthia snapped, clutching her hands together in front of her. "Already *what?* Y-Yeah, I fucked up. Yeah, everything with Darren went a lot further than it should have, b-but this doesn't all fall on me, okay?"

She swallowed, fighting back tears. She was hurt. She'd *been* hurt and Andy was oblivious.

"*Fuck*, Andy. When was the last time you asked me how my day was? When was the last time you read one of my stories that wasn't about *you*? When was the last time you really *looked* at me? The last five years have been all about *you*. Everything we ever did or talked

about was about you. When I miss a show, people notice – and then, I'm made out to be the bad guy. But if *you* miss one of my events, no one notices. No one *cares*. Because you were never there to begin with."

Andy looked down. He hated to admit she had a point. He'd never really noticed it before. And maybe that was the whole problem.

"Darren *sees* me," she continued, her voice breaking. "Darren is *excited* about me. Do you know what that feels like?"

Andy's heart twisted painfully as flashes from the night before appeared before his eyes. He knew exactly what it felt like. And he knew, just as Cynthia did, that neither of them had felt that way about each other for a long time.

"I didn't suddenly stop loving you, Andy," she said softly, finally looking directly at him. "I still love you. God, I love you so much. But I've realized that you can love someone and still not be the right person for them."

Andy nodded, his lips pressed tightly together. If she started to cry, he would lose it entirely.

He still loved her, too, despite everything.

"S-So," he said, his voice hoarse. "Is this it for us?"

"I think it has to be," Cynthia replied, sadly. "I'm so sorry it happened this way. We never should have let it get this bad. We should have talked about it. You -" She paused, correcting herself. "*We* both deserve better than what we could ever offer each other."

Andy agreed. "I'm sorry, Cynthia," he said, meaning it. "For everything."

"Me too." Cynthia wiped her eyes, streaks of mascara running down her cheeks. "Do you think we can save our friendship? I – I don't think I can handle not being friends after all this."

"We can try," Andy allowed, trying to stay optimistic. They would have to see how the next few weeks panned out. They still had a rough journey ahead.

Despite the obvious pain on her face, Cynthia smiled – a previous thought returning to the forefront of her mind.

"So…" she started, uncomfortably. "Doni?"

Andy almost laughed, his hand flying to his neck as though to cover up his bruises.

"S-Shit," he chuckled. "Uh – y-yeah, so…about that."

Cynthia grinned, extremely surprised – but also very curious. "Wow!" she said. "This is…news. Did you know – before all this – that you – that you were – er, what are you?" She closed her eyes, realizing she was going about this all wrong. "H-How do you – s-shit, I'm sorry, I'm fucking this up. I just wasn't expecting *this* – of all things. It's great! I swear, I'm totally cool with it – I'm just a little shocked. I don't know how I never knew."

Andy shrugged. After all he'd missed about her, he didn't blame her for not noticing.

"I'm still figuring it out, honestly," he said. "I obviously knew, b-but didn't think I needed to put a label on it. I was with you. It didn't really matter."

Cynthia had a thousand questions. "Do you love him?" she blurted.

Andy's voice caught in his throat as he nodded, dejectedly. "Y-Yeah," he admitted. "I do."

Cynthia moved toward him, gripping his arms. "I'm proud of you, you know that, right?" He could tell she meant it. Her eyes were filled with admiration. "Not just for the Axis thing. I – I know I gave you shit about that – but Andy, I don't know a single person who deserves this chance more than you do. I was just worried. B-But to figure yourself out in this way, too. T-That takes a lot of guts."

Andy looked down. "Don't be too proud of me," he mumbled. "I'm pretty sure I already fucked things up with Doni before they even really started, so…"

"What do you mean?"

"I – I left him this morning," Andy explained. "I told him I didn't know how this conversation was going to go. And I left to -"

Cynthia slapped Andy's arm hard. "Andy, you idiot!" she yelled. "Are you kidding me? *Go!* Stop moping around here with me and you go fix this mess you've made!"

Andy gaped at her. He didn't understand – they still had so much to talk about.

"Shouldn't we -"

"No!" Cynthia insisted. "We can talk later. Promise me you'll come home tonight. We'll hash things out and figure out what happens next – but I need you to go to him. *Fix*

this!"

Andy hesitated for a moment before enveloping Cynthia in a tight hug. He heard her sniffle against his shoulder as she clung to him.

"I love you," Andy said. "And I'm proud of you, too. I hope you know that."

"I know, Andy." Cynthia nodded. "Now, go!"

Andy tossed on his shoes quickly, giving Cynthia one last look before he bounded out the door. He didn't bother even putting on his seatbelt before he tore off down the road, gunning for Doni's apartment.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Doni sat on the edge of his bed with his phone pressed to his ear as Ro tried to piece together the bits of Doni's story. Most of their conversation started as scattered phrases amidst a sea of sobs, but she'd managed to calm him down enough to get an occasional full sentence.

"Okay, talk me through this once again," Ro said. "You were at the party, and then he kissed you…"

Doni wiped his nose on the back of his hand, still fighting the urge to cry. "He kissed me, and we came back to my apartment," he repeated.

"Aaaaaaand?"

Doni blushed, kicking at the floor. "W-We weren't going to do anything! We said we would take things slow – a-and we did! Mostly. We didn't – I – I mean, we didn't – *you know*."

"But *something* happened," Ro pressed.

"Yeah," Doni admitted. "After that, he told me he wanted to be with me. B-But then, this morning, Cynthia called and he said he didn't know how their conversation was going to go, and -" He sighed, heavily. "Just told me you 'told me so' and get it over with."

Ro paused. "This wasn't something I wanted to be right about, Doni," she said. "I wasn't rooting against this. I really like the two of you together, and I know how happy he makes you – which is the only thing I was ever truly worried about. I think Andy cares about you – no, scratch that – I *know* Andy cares about you. I just wish he had gotten his shit together before you two took this step."

Doni knew she was right. They both should have stopped before it went too far. They should have put a pin in the night and let Andy talk to Cynthia before they took it to a physical level.

"And it's a shame I'm going to have to kick his ass, now," Ro added. "I don't make the rules, but I sure follow them. And I warned him…"

"Don't do that," Doni said, sadly. "I'm kind of a fan of that ass."

Ro made a sound of disgust. "Oh, I bet you are," she said. "Listen, I'll come over in a little bit, alright? We'll drink cheap beer and watch some trashy TV – does that sound good?"

Doni opened his mouth to tell her that it sounded like an excellent idea, when a couple sharp knocks sounded at his front door. He frowned, straining his ears to see if he'd heard correctly – or if it had been one of his neighbors.

"Hang on a sec, Ro…"

Knock, knock. They happened again. It was definitely his front door, and it was definitely –

"Doni! It's me! Can I come in?"

Doni stood, his heart thundering. "F-Fuck," he whispered to Ro. "It's Andy."

"He's there?"

"Yeah," Doni looked around anxiously. "I – I don't know what he wants – I – f-fuck, Ro, I gotta go."

"Do you need me to come over there? I can be there in a few minutes!" Ro offered.

"DONI!" Andy's voice echoed through the house. "Please! Come talk to me!"

"Go away, Andy!" Doni shouted – although he really hoped he wouldn't.

"I'm coming over now," Ro insisted.

"No!" Doni said, quickly. "No, no, no – it's okay. I can handle this. I'll – I'll call you in a bit. Just let me talk to him."

Doni ended the call and tossed his phone on the bed, slowly making his way toward the stairs. The knocking stopped, and for a second, Doni worried Andy had left.

"Doni…" Andy's voice broke the silence, this time, softer – sadder. "Please, Doni."

Doni tiptoed the stairs cautiously and stood just inside the front door. He felt his whole body shake as he asked Andy a final time to:

"Please leave."

Andy realized Doni's voice was much closer. He leaned against the door, desperate. "Doni, please. I need to see you."

Doni wanted to throw the door open, but he couldn't make it that easy on him. He'd hurt Doni badly by leaving. Andy had to prove to him that he wanted this.

"You made your choice, Andy," Doni said. "You left."

"You told me to go!" Andy countered.

Doni rested his hand on the doorknob but didn't turn it. Andy had a point – he had asked him to leave, but only after he'd made it clear he was going home, no matter what Doni said.

The longer Doni waited to open the door, the higher Andy's stress levels rose. Finally, he broke.

"F-Fine!" he yelled, his voice cracking. "If you're not going to open the door – I-I'm just gonna say it so everyone can hear!" He took a deep breath, bracing himself. "Doni, *I'm sorry*. I shouldn't have left this morning – not the way I did. You were right. You were right about *everything*. About Cynthia, about me – about *us*. Everything. Last night was…incredible. It was the best night of my life. I – I've never felt more alive than when I'm with you."

Doni rested his forehead against the door, listening intently. He didn't care that the neighbors were probably listening in, too.

"Cynthia asked me this morning if I knew what it was like to be seen," Andy continued. "And, honestly, before you – I – I didn't. You play in half-empty bars for so long, you get used to being invisible. But *you* saw me. Doni, you noticed me. You cared. A-And I saw you. The nights you weren't there – I didn't even feel like playing. I went there looking for an audience, and instead, I found you. I went there to see *you*. For an excuse to spend five more minutes with *you*."

Andy felt the tears welling up. Both his stomach and his heart ached with worry that what he was saying would never be enough to convince Doni to forgive him. He couldn't live with that.

"*Fuck* a record deal," Andy declared, emotionally. "F-Fuck everyone else. I – I just want you."

Doni's hand turned the doorknob slowly.

But Andy wasn't done. "I will get on my knees and beg you for forgiveness for the rest of our lives, if that's what it takes. I will spend every single day making it up to you," he swore. "Adonis Delaney – *I am in love with you*. H-Hopelessly, head-over-heels, desperately in love with you. A-And…I'd really like to say that to your face."

Andy had said it. He dropped the 'L' word and Doni's head spun. He'd heard the word so many times in his life – had so many people say it to him – but this was the only time it truly mattered.

"Doni," Andy collapsed against the door, tears freely flowing. "*Please*…"

There was a small click and the door opened slightly. Andy jumped back as Doni's face appeared in the crack. A wave of relief washed over him.

"H-Hey," he breathed, quickly wiping the tears away.

"Are you being serious?" Doni asked, skeptically.

Andy nodded, quickly. "Yes," he said, tears still staining his cheeks. "God, yes. I meant it. Every word. I love you."

Before Andy could say anything else, Doni grabbed him by the arm and yanked him inside, letting the door slam behind him. Doni anxiously paced toward the kitchen, speaking very rapidly.

"For the record, you're not allowed to take it back. It's out there and -"

Andy caught him by the shoulder and whirled him around, grabbing him around the waist as he crushed his mouth to Doni's, kissing him with intense desperation. Doni melted against him, his fists twisting in Andy's shirt. Taking control of the situation, Doni shoved him back against the door, driving his tongue into Andy's mouth.

Andy whimpered, immediately turned on by Doni's aggressive response. He gripped the sides of Doni's neck as they kissed, keeping him as close as possible.

They gasped as they broke apart, panting heavily. Doni pressed his forehead to Andy's, his eyes softening as he whispered his own confession.

"I love you, too," he said. "I-If it wasn't already obvious."

Andy beamed, flipping Doni around, so that his back was now against the front

door. He pulled one of Doni's legs around his waist, leaning into him. If they didn't stop – Andy would fuck him right against the door. He didn't care who heard them.

Andy's lips trailed down Doni's neck as Doni released several unhinged moans. His tongue traced the marks he'd left there the night before, ready to leave a few more if Doni let him. He wanted the whole world to know Doni was his – and he wasn't letting him go.

"B-Babe," Doni gasped, gripping Andy's arms tight. "Babe, you're shaking. Are you alright?"

Andy brought his face to Doni's – his smile wide. "The most beautiful man in the world just told me he loves me," Andy said, cupping Doni's cheek gently. "If you wanted me to, I could fly right now."

Doni smiled in return, nuzzling his nose against Andy's as he kissed him tenderly. "I think you said something about being on your knees…" he mumbled.

Andy hit the floor instantly, pain searing through his leg, and he hugged Doni around the waist.

"I'm sorry," he said instantly, repeating the phrase over and over. "I'm sorry, Doni – I'm sorry – I'm so sorry."

Horrified, Doni reached down to try pulling him back to his feet, but Andy was dead weight.

"Baby, no!" he tried to explain. "N-No! I was trying to be sexy – I didn't mean you had to – n-no!"

Andy looked up at him and Doni sank down to meet him on the floor, climbing into Andy's lap. Andy held him close, rocking him gently.

"I'm so sorry," Andy said a final time. "I'm sorry that I made you feel, even for one second, that I did not love you with every fiber of my being."

"I know," Doni whispered. "It's okay. We're okay."

Doni buried himself in the crook of Andy's neck, and the two sat in silence, breathing each other in – letting the weight of their new world settle in around them.

"What happens next?" Doni asked, his voice muffed.

"Well," Andy smiled, kissing Doni's cheek. "First, I'm going to carry you upstairs, and we're going to finish what we started this morning."

Doni nodded his approval.

"And then, we figure everything else out. We're in this together."

"Forever?"

"God, I hope so."

CHAPTER THIRTY

Andy did go home that night. He and Cynthia split a bottle of wine and pushed all their furniture back so they could sit on the living room floor and just exist together for the last time as – whatever it was they'd been building for the last five years.

They laughed, they cried – they spoke openly and honestly, in a way they always wished they could. Andy asked about Darren – he wanted to know more about what it was that drew Cynthia to him.

She talked about his demeanor. He was kind and deep – wanted to talk about people and politics and social justice. He was well-read and knew about philosophy and history and art. Andy didn't take offense to this – his focus had always been music. He knew that. He made a mental note to try to see the world beyond that as soon as possible. He'd been sheltered without even realizing. Assumed he wasn't smart, solely because he hadn't exposed himself to these other facets of life.

When Cynthia talked about Darren, she smiled – her nose turning red and her eyes crinkling. Andy hadn't seen that face in a long time. She had once spoken about him like that, but he was thankful she was able to find that passion again.

"Do you love him?" Andy asked.

Cynthia looked down, hugging her knees to her chest. "I don't know," she said, honestly. "I don't think I'm ready to say that word just yet. But I care about him very much. And I could definitely see myself falling in love with him."

"I hope you let yourself feel that again," Andy said, reaching out to take one of her hands. "You deserve that."

She gave his hand a gentle squeeze. "I see a future with him," she said softly. "I didn't see one with you."

This should have hurt. This should have been the ultimate blow. But Andy understood – because he'd felt the same way. They talked about getting married. They talked about having kids. But it was all because they felt like they were expected to. The amount of anxiety these conversations caused the both of them should have been a red flag long ago.

Instead of hurt, he was relived – to know that he hadn't taken anything from her. That he hadn't caused her to compromise on her dreams. And that he didn't have to, either.

There was no lack of love in that tiny dingy apartment. Just two friends, who adored each other's company, and had shared some of the most important years of their lives together. Who only wanted the best for one another going forward.

They had witnessed so many of their friends break up over the years. It was messy. Disastrous. Vindictive.

Not this. And they were thankful for that.

Cynthia asked about Doni, in return. This was a little different – as she sort of already knew him but wanted to see him through Andy's eyes. She wanted to know more about Andy's journey with his sexuality, and why he never felt safe enough to talk about it with her.

He talked about his upbringing, and how – as an athlete – it was easier to just play along with the stereotypes. He dated cheerleaders in middle and high school, because that's what football players did. And then after the accident, he felt so disconnected from his body that he hadn't entertained the thought of dating anyone – until she came along. She helped him see himself as desirable again, and at that point, he was in love with her, so his interest in anyone else became a moot point. He didn't think he needed to say anything.

But Doni – Doni changed everything. Andy turned into a total sap when talking about him. His face ached from smiling so broadly. He told her that Doni's voice was the most comforting sound in the world, and that when Doni smiled and it was because of something Andy did, he felt like his life had purpose again. He had never felt safer than the night he'd

spent in Doni's arms. He felt bad that he didn't feel that with her – but he didn't even know those kinds of feelings existed until they did.

Cynthia held tight to his hand as he spoke, stroking it gently with her thumb. When he finished, she moved to his side, and he wrapped an arm around her, holding her close. Neither paid any attention to how long they stayed that way.

The next morning, Andy packed up some of his things, and kissed Cynthia goodbye. It wasn't romantic – it was closure. He would be moving to Del Luna in about a month, and Cynthia had agreed to consider other living options in the meantime, but Andy would stay with Doni.

It was fast – too fast, some would argue, but Doni liked the idea of Andy being in his bed every night, instead of Cynthia's – whether it was platonic or not. Andy and Cynthia could have switched off nights – Cynthia staying with Darren the days he needed to be at the apartment, and vice versa – but Andy didn't mind staying at Doni's either. In fact, he wanted to spend as much time with him as possible before the move.

Something they refused to talk about.

A week passed by quickly, and Andy knew he had to tell his parents about Axis. He decided it was time to also tell them about Doni, which terrified him – but Doni made plans to introduce him to his father, too – to make it fair.

The night before they left to meet Doni's dad, Andy came home with a dangerous grin on his face, kicking off his shoes quickly as he bound into the kitchen where Doni was busy washing dishes. He grabbed Doni by the waist, pressing himself against his back, kissing his neck tenderly.

"Someone's excited to see me," Doni commented, feeling Andy through his jeans.

"Someone…" he said slowly, nipping at Doni's earlobe. "Just got the greenlight from the clinic."

Doni turned around quickly, his eyes growing wide. He leaned back against the sink, pressing a hand against Andy's chest to hold him at bay. "Wait," he said. "You mean…?" he raised an eyebrow and bit his lip.

Despite having spent every night in the same bed, Andy respected Doni's request to get tested before they took their physical relationship further. As soon as he knew about Darren's involvement with Cynthia, he understood. While Andy didn't think Darren had been sleeping with anyone else, it was still better to be safe than sorry. Thankfully, his tests came back clean – which meant…

Andy nodded and kissed Doni deeply, moving Doni's arms up around his neck. Andy's fingers fiddled with the button on Doni's jeans, eagerly.

"W-Wait," Doni pulled away. "Oh God, b-babe – hang on a second –"

Andy frowned, pulling his hand away. "Am I moving too fast?"

"No!" Doni insisted. "Oh my God, no. We just have to – you know – f-figure a few things out. You can't just jump into the deep end your first time -"

"I'll jump into *your* deep end…" Andy growled, leaning back in for another kiss.

"Andy – *focus!* I'm assuming you want to top?" Doni tried to ignore the hand Andy slipped into his pants while he asked.

"I'm flexible," Andy answered honestly. He didn't know – nor did he care – which he preferred. Whatever Doni wanted to do, he would be into it.

Doni moaned softly as Andy stroked him. He was surprised by Andy's response, but not disappointed in it. He'd topped before and would be open to it if Andy wanted that but figured it might be easier to stick to what Andy might be more familiar with, for now.

"I – oh fuck – a-admire the enthusiasm." He tilted his head to the side as Andy dragged his tongue along the nape of Doni's neck. "W-We'll put a pin in that for the future, but uh – I – o-oh, my God – I think I promised to ride you like a horse, didn't I?"

Andy's knees almost buckled at the suggestion, and he moved his hands quickly to lift Doni off the ground, wrapping his legs around Andy's waist.

"Babe, your leg…" Doni said, frowning.

"I don't care," Andy replied, kissing him fiercely.

Ignoring the pain radiating down his right side, Andy carried him up to their bedroom where they undressed hastily, falling back onto the bed.

"Y-You sure about this?" Doni asked between kisses, praying Andy wouldn't change his mind.

"Yes," Andy said firmly, his eyes meeting Doni's. "I would like to fuck my boyfriend,

please."

Doni beamed. "Boyfriend, huh?" It was the first time they'd said that word aloud. It had obviously been implied, but hearing it sent a wave of joy and excitement through them.

Andy's heart thudded as Doni explained to him what they needed to do to prepare. Doni knew Andy had the right idea – he'd demonstrated that before; he just needed a little extra direction. Doni blushed furiously as Andy took his instruction extremely well – diving in, once again, without hesitation. He bit his lip hungrily as Doni writhed under him, Andy's now-slicked fingers working him open.

"T-That feel okay?" Andy asked, multiple times – just to be sure.

Doni moaned into a pillow, biting his fist. It felt more than okay – and even better when Andy lowered himself, replacing his fingers with his tongue.

"J-Jesus Christ…" Doni whimpered. "Oh God, baby…j-just like that…"

Andy had never been more turned on than he was watching Doni unravel under his touch. He focused on the sounds escaping Doni's mouth as he pushed his fingers in once again – gently pressing the spot that made his partner tremble and cry out loudly. Andy grinned proudly, nipping at one of Doni's butt cheeks playfully.

"Cut it out!" Doni said through breathless laughter.

"I'm sorry," Andy said – *he wasn't* – kissing the spot he'd just bit. "I didn't realize eating ass was serious business."

"S-Shut the fuck up," Doni whined, still smiling. "C-Can you hurry up and fuck me, please?"

Doni and Andy switched spots, allowing Doni to climb onto Andy's lap, straddling him. It wasn't the most ideal first position, but it gave Doni most of the control – which took some of the pressure off Andy. Andy gasped and grunted softly as his cock pressed against Doni's hole, begging for entrance.

"Breathe, baby," Doni guided him. "Breathe, breathe, breathe – g-go slow…we can stop if you -"

"Don't you dare!" Andy hissed through grit teeth. "Y-You are…*exactly* where I want you…"

Doni released a satisfied moan as Andy slid in – just a little at first. His own cock jerked as he watched Andy's face shift from deep concentration to pure bliss as Doni lifted himself and dropped back down again carefully – Andy sinking into him just a little bit more.

"Oh, fuck…" Andy had never felt anything so intense before. Doni was tight – *very* tight, and it felt incredible. "I-I'm not hurting you, am I?"

Doni shook his head, holding one of Andy's hands to his cheek. "N-No – God, you feel so fucking good. Y-You're almost there, babe. You doin' alright?"

Andy nodded eagerly, holding his free hand to Doni's hip, guiding his gentle riding motions until they were fluid. Andy's eyes rolled back and he bit his lip, doing everything he could to resist his already growing orgasm. He wanted to savor this – *needed* to feel this.

Doni did as he promised, riding Andy slowly at first, picking up pace as he loosened up. Andy gripped Doni's hips, watching the spot where their bodies joined intently. Seeing Doni take his cock so enthusiastically was quite possibly the hottest thing he'd ever seen.

He finally looked up, taking in the euphoric look on Doni's face.

"God – y-your eyes – f-fuck…" Andy could not believe how beautiful his partner was. He reached a hand up to Doni's chest and Doni grabbed it tightly, directing Andy to lightly tease one of his nipples.

Doni laughed between moans. "My eyes?!" he chuckled, slowing his hips to a slow, tantalizing roll. "Y-You are balls deep and you're t-talking – oh – J-Jesus, fuck – about my *eyes?"*

"F-Fine!" Andy tossed his head back, releasing a new stream of groans. "Y-Your ass, too – your cock – your whole fuckin' body. M-My *God*. Mmmf - *my* God. *A-Adonis*…"

Doni shuddered at the mention of his full name and fell forward, kissing Andy deeply as Andy thrust into him, finally taking back control. Andy pulled his lips from Doni long enough to command:

"On your knees."

Doni beamed. "Yes, sir."

He climbed off Andy and bent over in front of him, his knees on the edge of the bed. Andy gave Doni's ass a playful spank as he stood behind him, lining himself up, and pushing himself in again. Doni's back arched as he laid his chest against the mattress, turning his head

enough for Andy to see his face.

This was a beautiful mistake of an idea – Andy thought, realizing he wasn't going to last long after only a few thrusts. The loud wet slaps that echoed through the room as their skin met, combined with the way Doni's face contorted in pleasure as he whimpered for release, were more than Andy could handle. He whined, his breathing growing desperate, and Doni snaked a hand down to stroke himself.

"D-Doni…" Andy whimpered, desperately. "F-Fuck – I'm gonna cum, babe – s-should I…"

"Don't stop!" Doni demanded, stroking harder. He was so close, too. If he timed it right, they could finish together, but Andy couldn't move. Doni needed him to stay just like this. He twisted his other hand in the sheets, his mouth opened wide.

"D-Do you want me to pull -"

"No!" Doni's cries became unhinged as he slammed himself backward against Andy. "P-Please, *don't!"*

Andy couldn't hold it any longer. He gripped Doni's hips tight, balancing one knee on the edge of the mattress as he thrusted faster.

"Oh f-fuck, oh fuck – y-you want me to -"

"*YES. FUCK.* A-Andy! J-Just fucking cum like this – *please!"*

Andy doubled over as he came, one hand reaching out for Doni's, clenching it tight. He moaned into Doni's shoulder, kissing it gently as he huffed – steadying his breathing, before sinking to his knees on the floor. Doni gasped loudly as Andy started to clean the mess with his tongue.

"Andy…" Doni panted, his eyes closed tight as his hand flew up and down his soaked shaft. "Andy – p-please – pleasepleaseplease - fuck, I'm so close – I'm s-so close…"

Andy turned him over, taking Doni's cock in his mouth, sucking enthusiastically - his hand following the motion of his lips. The second they made eye contact – Andy on his knees submissively between Doni's legs - Doni's body gave an electric jolt, his jaw dropping wide.

"Oh YES – YES – GOD. *FUCK.* ANDY!" Doni fell back against the bed as he shot his load directly into the back of Andy's throat.

Andy coughed a little, swallowing it down, before resting his head in Doni's lap, kissing his thigh tenderly. Doni slid from the bed onto the floor with him, allowing Andy to pull him close. Their chests heaved as they tried to catch their breath between sloppy, open-mouthed kisses.

"Y-You did so good, babe," Doni said, laying his head against Andy's chest. "T-Thank you…"

Andy didn't respond. He was still basking in the afterglow of everything they'd just experienced.

"Are you okay?" Doni asked, concerned with Andy's silence. He reached up, turning Andy's face toward him.

Andy nodded, kissing Doni slowly. In truth, he was fighting the urge to burst into tears, he was so happy. But, crying after sex would be embarrassing, he thought. Surely, Doni would never let him live it down.

"I'm perfect," he said, adding a kiss to Doni's forehead. "Absolutely perfect. Best sex I've ever had."

"Me too," Doni mumbled.

Andy didn't believe him, but he was flattered that Doni would lie to make him feel better.

"Liar," he commented. "But I'll – I'll get better. You know, I'll learn a-and stuff…"

Doni leaned back a little, frowning. "I'm not lying."

"It's okay," Andy insisted. "I know you've been with other guys. There's no way I'm – I mean, they knew what they were doing. And were probably better – b-bigger, even…"

Doni placed a hand on the side of Andy's face, staring at him in painful disbelief. Doni didn't think that at all, and he didn't like that Andy just assumed he was comparing him to his past lovers.

"Andy, stop," he said. "First off, did you not *see* what you just did to me? Second: it's better with you, because *I'm in love with you,* you fuckin' idiot. *This* blows everything else out of the water. T-Thank you, for trusting me with this – thank you for sharing this with me. You were amazing. *I. Love. You."*

As Doni's voice cracked, Andy no longer worried about being embarrassed about crying. Doni was on the brink, too. Hearing his confession lifted every concern from Andy's shoulders – about everything. He smiled softly and brought his lips back down to Doni's in relief.

"I love you," he said, his eyes brimming with tears. "I love you so much."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Andy's hands shook as they pulled up outside a large gray ranch-style home a few towns over from Danville, where Doni's dad lived. Andy hadn't been able to eat anything all morning, despite how many times Doni insisted he at least try *something*. Andy wanted Doni's dad to like him so badly.

Doni kissed the back of Andy's hand before they got out of the car. "It's going to be okay," he promised. "My dad is so chill."

And chill he certainly was. The second they stepped out of the car an older man came racing down the driveway. His skin was the same tan color as Doni's and his mop of curly hair matched as well – only a peppery gray instead. He smiled and opened his arms wide, pulling his son into a warm hug.

"There's my boy!" Mr. Delaney shouted.

When the two broke apart, Doni turned to introduce Andy. "Dad, this is my boyfriend, Andy," he said. "Babe, this is my dad – Gil."

"It's so good to meet you, sir," Andy said politely, reaching out to shake Gil's hand.

Gil laughed, shaking it for a moment before hugging Andy just as he did with Doni.

"You're family too, son. Remember that," he said, affectionately. "Adonis has told me so much about you. I'm so glad you're here."

Andy tried to hide the emotion welling up inside him and nodded in agreement. Gil escorted them back inside where he'd prepared lunch for them, excited to learn everything he could about the boy who'd stolen his son's heart.

Andy told Gil about how he'd grown up in the South and how he'd had a pretty normal family life. He told him about his football days – and even a bit about his accident, but then he turned the conversation to his love of music and how that led to meeting Doni. Gil was most curious to learn about what Andy's intentions were with his son, but he didn't push too hard when asking about the future.

After lunch, Doni excused himself to the bathroom, and Andy made his way down the main hallway of Gil's home. He paused by the stairs, his eyes scanning a series of family photos – landing finally on a photo of a beautiful young woman in a yellow sundress. Her long brown hair cascaded down her shoulders and she beamed while wrestling with a fussy, curly-haired toddler in her arms. Andy smiled softly, touching the glass of the frame.

"He was cute kid."

Gil stood at the end of the hall, watching Andy carefully. Andy retracted his hand quickly, embarrassed that he'd been caught.

"Still cute," he replied.

"Sure is," Gil agreed, walking toward him. He paused for a moment to look over the photo in front of Andy. A glimmer of pain passed over his face before he spoke again. "Adonis' mother. Josephine. Josie."

"She's beautiful," Andy said, eyeing the photo again.

"She was. Never understood quite what she saw in me, but I'm glad she did. We were just kids ourselves – but she wanted Adonis so badly. We went through hell to have him, so once he was here, she never let him out of her sight."

Gil frowned, his expression darkening.

"He told you what happened to her, right?"

Andy nodded. "A-A little bit. Cancer, he said?"

Gil drew a deep breath. "Caught it too late. She was gone so fast – barely had the chance to even process our options."

"I'm so sorry," Andy offered. "I can't even imagine what that must have been like. For both of you."

"I didn't really have time to dwell on it," Gil said with a small shrug. "I had a kid to raise. But I'll be damned if I don't miss her more than anything. To love someone as much as

we loved each other is both a blessing and a curse."

A silence fell between them and Andy swallowed the lump forming in his throat. It almost felt like a warning.

"You know," Gil started slowly, still not looking directly at Andy. "When Adonis first brought Erik home, I thought – *wow*. This young man is better than anyone I could have imagined for my son. He was smart, and ambitious – helped Adonis grow up a little – taught him how to be a responsible adult. And he loved him. So much. I could tell that right away."

Andy didn't move, feeling a little queasy. He braced himself for Gil to tell him he didn't deserve to be with Doni. That Doni was making a mistake by choosing him over Erik.

"So, when he called me to tell me they'd split, I panicked a little. For him to lose that stability – to lose the person he was building his life with – I worried. I saw a lot of his mother in his behavior. She was the most incredible person, don't get me wrong, but not always the most rational. I called him every night. I could hear the pain in his voice, even when he tried to hide it."

Gil suddenly turned his face toward Andy.

"And then he started to talk about you. Just as friends at first, but he wasn't fooling me. The way he spoke about you – you'd think you walked on water. And now – sitting here with the both of you, seeing the way you look at each other – I've realized there are more important things in a relationship than…rationality."

Andy returned Gil's gaze, his brow furrowing slightly.

"I have never seen Adonis look at anyone the way he looks at you," Gil said quietly, tears forming in his eyes. "I've never seen him look so happy. And the way you look at him reminds me of how I used to look at my Josie."

Andy wanted to tell Gil he would do anything to keep Doni happy. That he promised to cherish and protect him for the rest of their lives. But he couldn't breathe, let alone speak.

"There is nothing more important to me than my son's happiness." Gil's voice broke slightly. "And I can tell that you make him *very* happy."

God, Gil really loved his son.

"H-He makes me happy, too." Andy choked back his own tears.

"You guys aren't talking about me, are you?"

Doni appeared in the doorway at the end of the stairs, half-joking but also half-worried over what they were talking about. Gil smiled and waved Doni over.

"Just showing Andy your Mum," he explained.

Doni bit his lip as he stood at Andy's side, his eyes falling on the photo of his mother. He took a small, emotional breath, steadying himself. Andy wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him close, pressing his lips to Doni's temple.

"You look just like her," Andy whispered sweetly.

Doni blinked back tears and nodded.

Gil stepped toward the kitchen. "Enough tears for now," he said, wiping away his own. "We've got a full day planned. Come on."

They spent the majority of the day exploring town – scoping out a few vintage record stores, visiting Doni's high school, and then grabbing sushi for dinner. Andy was thankful for the normalcy, and for every secret smile Gil tossed him whenever Doni wasn't looking. He laughed and clapped a hand on Andy's shoulder, introducing him proudly to everyone they met along the way.

Back home for the night, Gil allowed the boys to settle in the guest bedroom. Even though they were only an hour or so from home – they decided to stay over, as Doni hadn't seen his dad in quite a while. Not intentionally, of course, Doni explained – work had just been too busy.

Resting, Andy absently stroked Doni's hair as they curled up on the guest bed. He reflected on everything Gil said to him about Josephine and Erik, and how Doni spoke about him before revealing their relationship. Like Gil had felt with his wife – Andy didn't quite understand why Doni chose him, but he wasn't going to let himself dwell on it for too long.

"You've been quiet, babe," Doni commented, concerned.

Andy stared at the ceiling. "Your Dad just…accepted me," he said. "Like, no questions asked. Part of the family. I just – I didn't expect that."

Doni turned his head to look at him. "That's how it should be," he said. "Parents are supposed to want what's best for their kids. In theory."

Andy nodded. *In theory*, he echoed in his head.

"Doni?"

"Yeah?"

Andy was fighting tears again. He couldn't believe how vulnerable he'd been in the last twenty-four hours. It was scary and new, and he didn't know if he liked it.

"I'm terrified to tell my parents," he admitted, a sob catching in his throat.

Doni sat up, quickly. "Oh, babe…" he said, softly, reaching for him. "Come here."

He swapped places with Andy, allowing him to bury his face in Doni's chest. He sniffled loudly and quickly brushed away a tear. He didn't want Doni to think he was the reason he was scared to tell them. It wasn't Doni at all. It was the people he'd grown up around, and the overwhelming fear that they wouldn't accept him. Not the way Gil did.

"Everything will be okay, I promise," Doni said, kissing Andy's forehead. "Even if it's not – you've got me. Fuck them if they don't realize how amazing you are."

Andy smiled weakly, his hand curling in Doni's shirt.

God, he really loved Gil's son, too.

Andy's concerns about his family weren't unfounded. The following weekend, Doni's knee bounced anxiously as he sat on a small bench in the entryway of the McLayne family home, listening to the screaming match happening in the kitchen.

"Julia, calm down." Trace – Andy's father – tried to mediate to the best of his ability.

"I'm not the one being irrational here!" Julia fought back, ignoring her husband. She stared at Andy in frustration. "You show up here with a complete stranger, telling us he's your *boyfriend* and you expect me to -"

"I expect you to be happy for me!" Andy yelled. He refused to let them see him cry. He wouldn't do it. He was angry and embarrassed that Doni was witnessing this.

"What happened with Cynthia?" Julia asked, incredulously. "You two were so happy together!"

"We weren't happy, Mom," Andy told her. "We weren't happy for a long time."

"Just because you're going through a rough spot doesn't mean you have to – *s-switch teams!"* Julia gestured toward the hallway where she knew Doni was waiting. "You're just confused!"

Andy shook, his hands clenching into fists. "I'm not *confused,* Mom! That's so *insulting*," he said through grit teeth. He had never been more thankful there was an island standing between the two of them. "I – I love Doni. A-And you're gonna have to fucking *deal* with that."

"Language, Andrew!" Julia shot at him.

"Jules, enough!" Trace butt in again. "If he's happy, that's all that matters. What difference does it make?"

"I just think it's strange that we had *no idea*," she pointed out. "You didn't show any signs while you were growing up that you – t-that you -"

"Because I was *scared*, Mom!" Andy said. "I was afraid that you would act just like this!"

Out in the hallway, Doni covered his ears with his hands, resisting the urge to march into the kitchen to tell Andy's mom off himself. He wanted to escort Andy out the house and tell him he never had to come back again if he didn't want to.

A pair of shoes appeared in Doni's line of sight.

"Hey…" a soft voice interrupted the shouting.

Doni looked up to see Andy's older brother Kenny standing in front of him. He looked worried.

"You don't have to listen to this, man," he said. "Come on, I'll show you where you can smoke outside."

Doni didn't want to leave Andy alone with his parents, but he definitely needed a cigarette, so he followed Kenny, gratefully. They stood by the back of the garage and Kenny waited with him as Doni lit up.

"I'm sorry about them," Kenny offered. "They're not bad people, I swear. Mom's just

been…overprotective of Andy since the accident. I don't blame him for moving across the country like he did. I would have done the same thing."

Doni exhaled a stream of smoke, shaking his head. "I just feel helpless. I wish I could do something – say something – to change their minds. O-Or at the very least to defend him."

"That's not your job," Kenny said. "She'll come around. Maybe not right away, but eventually."

Doni peered up at Kenny, hesitating before speaking. "Does this…weird you out at all?"

"No," Kenny answered, quickly. "I mean, did I see it coming? No. It was definitely a surprise. But Andy's my brother. I just want him to be happy."

On cue, Andy burst through the back door and onto the deck. Doni and Kenny turned, stunned by the sudden outburst.

"FUCK!"

Andy hurried down the stairs faster than he should have, his legs buckling under him as he came crashing down into the grass. Doni dropped his cigarette immediately and raced to his side.

"Andy!"

Andy knelt on the ground, tears streaming down his face as he sobbed. Doni pulled him close, rocking him back and forth.

"Are you okay?" Doni fussed. "D-Did you hurt your leg? Can you stand?"

Andy shook his head, wailing painfully. It felt like years of fear and anguish were finally being released.

"I – I don't get it," Andy managed to get out between sobs. "I j-just don't get it. W-Why doesn't s-she…"

Doni's heart broke as Andy collapsed further against him. He looked up at Kenny who stood by, just as devastated. Holding Andy tighter, Doni thought of only one thing he could do to help.

He could get Andy out of there.

"We're leaving, babe," he whispered. "We're not staying here tonight. We'll change our flight and go home tomorrow, okay?"

Andy didn't respond. Instead, he released a trembling breath and nodded, clinging to Doni tightly.

"Yeah, Dad, we're safe," Doni said, holding his phone as he stepped back into their hotel room later that night. "He's…resting. Today took a lot out of him. Y-Yeah, I'll uh – I'll let him know. I don't think he wants to talk to anyone right now. We love you, too. I'll call you when we get home."

Doni hung up the phone and turned to Andy, who was curled up on the bed, silent, but awake. Doni kicked off his shoes, climbing in behind him. He wrapped an arm around Andy's waist and pressed his lips along Andy's shoulders.

"Hey, baby…" he whispered. "You doin' okay?"

Andy remained quiet, but covered Doni's hand with his own, pulling it up to his chest. Doni could feel Andy's heartbeat against it. It was still racing.

"Dad says he loves you," Doni added. "And Kenny texted me to let you know that he uh – he's treating your dad to a weekend away from home. Give your mom some space. They're pretty pissed at her, too."

Andy didn't know how to feel about this, but he was a bit relieved to know his dad and his brother were on his side. He needed to know he was making the right choice. That bringing Doni into his whole mess was worth it in the long run.

Andy rolled over, facing Doni, bringing his face close to his. Doni smiled fondly, kissing the end of Andy's nose in hopes of getting some kind of smile in return.

Instead, Andy looked serious.

"Come to Del Luna with me."

It wasn't an ask – it wasn't a request. It was a plea. Andy didn't want to do life without Doni. If he had been uncertain he and Cynthia could manage long distance, he was

even less sure he could handle being several hours away from Doni at any given time.

It was probably unhealthy, but he didn't care. He was tired of not going after the things he wanted.

When Doni didn't respond, Andy panicked.

"I know that's a big ask, but I just got you – a-and I'm not ready to lose -"

"Don't be stupid," Doni muttered.

Andy felt his heart sink. "I know," he said, sadly. "I know, I shouldn't have said anything."

"No." Doni shook his head. "I mean, it's stupid that you thought I *wasn't* going with you."

Andy's eyes grew wide. "W-What?"

Doni traced the side of Andy's face with his thumb, his expression soft and adoring.

"I've already given my notice. There are plenty of bars in the city – and I've got a ton of friends there. People I'd really love to introduce you to. It won't be hard for me to find work. And Ro will love the excuse to come visit the Valley." He pressed his forehead to Andy's. "There's no way I'm letting you do this alone."

Andy kissed him abruptly, holding both sides of Doni's face with his hands. As Doni wrapped his whole body around him, Andy felt every worry shrink.

"I love you," he mumbled against Doni's lips.

"I know," Doni replied. "I know, baby."

As they melted into a slow and passionate embrace, they savored every bit of each other, knowing that was all they needed. Love. Without hesitation. Without compromises. Without frustration or lies. Just a mutual understanding of a mutual need.

Love in its most honest and raw form.

They were doing this – *life* – together.

And together, they were unstoppable.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Andy carried a heavy box of records out to his car, the last of his stuff from the apartment. Doni stepped out of the passenger seat, rounding the back to open the trunk.

"That the last of it?" he asked. "You need help with anything else?"

"Nah," Andy said, setting the box in the tiny amount of space they had left in the car. "I think we're pretty much done here."

A voice cut in.

"You think you're leaving town without a hug?"

Andy turned to see Cynthia crossing the parking lot. She smiled, reaching her arms out to him. Andy pulled her in close, planting a kiss on her temple.

"Hey gorgeous," he said, keeping things light. "I wasn't expecting to see you."

"You got everything?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am." He stepped back. "Everything left in there is all yours. I even left you a couple things I thought you might like."

"Records?" Her eyes lit up, hopefully.

Andy shrugged, grinning. Cynthia noticed Doni standing nearby and she waved, politely.

"Hi, Doni. Cute flannel."

"Hey, Cynthia," Doni kept it brief. He wanted to point out that the flannel was Andy's, but he was certain she already knew that.

"You guys leaving today?"

Andy nodded. "One more stop, and then we're hittin' the road."

Before Cynthia could respond, a fourth voice entered the conversation, albeit a little more nervous. Andy turned to see Darren approaching slowly.

"H-Hey – sorry to interrupt, but uh…" he moved closer to Cynthia. "C-Can I get the keys, babe? I'll grab some of your boxes while you're saying goodbye."

Andy had never met Darren in person. He seemed far less intimidating than he was on screen. Cynthia blushed as she realized he'd followed her from the car.

"Oh! Y-Yeah, sure – I can help in just a second," she said, handing them over. An awkward pause passed between all of them before Cynthia realized she should introduce him. "D-Darren, this is Andy. A-Andy, this is…Darren."

Darren gave Andy a short nod. "G-Good to finally meet you," he said. "Sorry for – you know – stealing your girl and stuff."

Doni answered before Andy could get a word in. "Don't be sorry," Doni reassured him, with a slightly possessive grin. "It all worked out in the end."

Andy laughed and shook his head, pride swelling in his chest. "Darren, this is my partner – Doni. And unless you plan on stealing him as well, I think we're cool."

Darren smiled, a bit relieved. "I think I'm good with just the one."

Doni shrugged. "Your loss, honestly."

Another uncomfortable silence fell between them. Doni sighed.

"Well, as fun as this reunion has been, I'll be in the car," he said, eyeing Andy with an eagerness to get the hell out of there as soon as possible.

Darren agreed and started toward the apartment. "And I'm just gonna scoot by ya and grab the last of the stuff, if you don't mind…"

"The uh – the door's unlocked," Andy told him.

"Awesome," Darren said, not bothering to look back at them. "Travel safe, Anthony. Was good to meet you."

"It's Andy!" Andy and Cynthia called after him in unison.

As he disappeared up the stairs and into the apartment, Andy turned back to Cynthia. Her cheeks were a bright shade of red, and she sighed, thankful that it had gone

smoother than she imagined it would.

"I'm going to assume you don't want to join us for lunch before you head out of town," she said.

Andy eyed Doni in the rearview mirror. "I think we're going to pass," he said. "Doni might actually explode if I even suggest it."

Cynthia understood. Darren would likely have a similar reaction. She reached out for Andy's hand. "Please text me when you get there. I want to know that you made it safe and sound."

"I will," he promised.

"I love you," she whispered.

"I love you, too, Cyn," he replied, kissing her cheek. "Don't be a stranger, okay?"

Outside the Tavern, Ro clung to Doni tightly, showing more emotion than Andy had ever seen her show before. She whispered a few things to Doni that Andy couldn't hear, but Doni repeated: "I promise" a few times in response.

"You better not find a new best friend down there, you got it?" she said. "And if you get into any trouble, you call me. I've got bail money, and I don't ask a lot of questions."

Doni nodded. "I'm going to be okay, Ro."

"And I get to stay with you when I come to visit!" she insisted. "I'm not paying Valley hotel rates when you're living it up with a rock star, okay?"

Andy smiled. "The couch has your name on it!"

Ro turned, offended. "Excuse me? If I'm coming to stay, Doni and I are sharing a bed. Your ass is going to be on the couch."

"Is that so?" Andy asked, amused.

Ro poked a finger into Andy's chest. "Don't think you're off the hook just because Doni's forgiven you," she threatened. "You so much as step *one toe* out of line – hurt a *single hair* on his beautiful head – I *will* kill you."

Andy raised his hands in submission. "Whoa, what happened to just kicking my ass?"

"We've upgraded," she said, seriously. "He's uprooting his entire life for you. You had best *marry* him. You hear me?"

Doni stepped in, embarrassed. "Ro, come on, leave him alone."

"I want to hear a promise, McLayne," Ro doubled down, ignoring Doni.

"I promise," Andy said.

"Promise *what?"*

"I promise to marry him."

Both Ro and Doni stared at him in surprise. Doni couldn't hide his grin, while Ro nodded, satisfied with this response. She turned on heel, starting back toward the Tavern.

"Good enough for me," she said. "Now – go – scoot – get out of here. Not all of us have big record deals. Some of us actually have to *work* for a living."

"Love you, too, Ro!" Doni called after her.

She waved over her shoulder, trying to hide the tears freely falling from her eyes. "Yeah, yeah."

Andy and Doni stood by the car before leaving, holding each other close. Doni looked around at the town he'd called home for so long, while Andy kept his focus solely on Doni's face.

"You sure about this?" Doni asked.

"No," Andy said, honestly. "But I've got you, so I know I'll be okay."

Doni slid his arms around Andy's neck, smiling sheepishly. "Did you mean it?" he asked.

"Mean what?" Andy asked, keeping coy.

"You know what," Doni said. "What you said to Ro. D-Do you want to marry me? I mean, I know it's *way* too soon, but like – someday."

Andy interrupted him with a kiss. Doni moaned softly, certain this meant that Andy was trying to get out of answering the question. He knew Andy couldn't possibly be serious. They only just –

“Of course, I meant it,” Andy said as soon as they parted. “You’re it for me, babe.”

Doni felt his heart swell. “E-Even if you get super famous and have all these groupies all over you, and -”

“Doni,” Andy said, shaking his head. “Shut up and kiss me.”

So, Doni did. Without complaint.

EPILOGUE

Two years passed quickly, and Andy went from a no-name talent from the middle of nowhere, to a nationally recognized artist. His first album performed well, going viral on social media, which kicked off a national tour.

Doni went along for the ride. He had planned to make money bartending during their down time – but when the down time didn't happen, Andy insisted Doni just enjoyed himself. For the first time in his life, he didn't have to scramble to make ends meet. He felt a little guilty, but Andy assured him he didn't need to.

It was hard to find alone time on the road, but they made do. Occasionally, they'd have a moment or two on the bus while the others were still loading in.

"Excuse me, sir," Andy dropped his voice low, eyeing Doni across the small kitchen area. "I'm not sure you're supposed to be in here."

Doni grinned, looking around to ensure they were by themselves. "I don't know if you know this," he taunted. "But I'm *with* the band."

"Oh," Andy mocked surprise. "You don't say. I'm gonna have to see your backstage pass…"

He slipped his arms around Doni, Andy's hands landing on his ass, gripping it tightly. Doni gasped, lifting his lips toward Andy's.

"Ask nicely," Doni teased.

Andy kissed him, lifting him up as they backed toward their bed. "Gonna have to give you a pat down," Andy said, his voice husky. "For security's sake…"

"Oh?" Doni kissed along Andy's jawline. "In that case, I should warn you that there's something hard and possibly dangerous in my pants…"

"Thank you for your honesty," Andy said, dropping him onto the bed. "I'm gonna have to take care of that, I'm afraid."

Doni squealed as Andy leapt on top of him, desperately pulling at his clothes. They never had very long, and often feared being walked in on, but it only heightened the excitement.

Halfway through the tour, Andy received an invitation which brought them back to the Danville area. Cynthia and Darren were getting married. Andy had always suspected he and Doni were moving too quickly, but Darren and Cynthia didn't waste any time at all.

They both left WMIS shortly after the Axis debacle, unsure they wanted to work with the same brand of integrity that Vera and Nick prided themselves on. They wanted to amplify voices who deserved to be heard – not those of the rich and powerful, who were able to twist the narrative to fit whatever story they wanted to tell.

They started a small paper on the outskirts of town, which did well for itself, all things considered. Darren's reputation helped boost them out the gate – but it was Cynthia's talent with the written word that put them on the map. Andy was proud of her.

The wedding was beautiful, as was to be expected. Andy thought it might be weird, as he had always imagined seeing Cynthia in a wedding dress from the other end of the aisle, but it wasn't weird at all. Doni clutched his hands tightly as he even choked back tears watching the ceremony. Andy found himself looking at Doni more than Darren and Cynthia, wondering what it would be like when it was finally their turn.

"Thank you for coming," Cynthia said, throwing her arms around Andy as they met during the reception. "I know it's so hard for you to get away these days, so we weren't expecting you to drop everything."

"I wouldn't have missed it," Andy assured her. "You look beautiful. Congratulations, both of you." He nodded in Darren's direction.

"You're mid-tour, aren't you?" Darren pointed out. "Where are you off to next?"

"East Coast," Andy said. "Boston, then Portland – Maine, obviously, not Oregon. It's

been wild. I've never seen so many places in my life."

"We're proud of you," Cynthia said, sincerely.

"It'll be nice to be home though," Andy added, taking Doni's hand. "We haven't been able to get much of a break. Might be good to settle down for a bit."

"Until the next album, you mean."

"Don't remind me," Andy said. He was already dreading it a little – but not because he didn't love what he was doing. He just missed having any sense of privacy. He wanted to start a life with Doni, and that was proving to be a little bit difficult with the media constantly shoving cameras in their faces.

"Settling down, huh?" Darren smirked. "You two thinking about getting hitched?"

Doni glanced at Andy. "Maybe. Someday. He's gotta maintain this eligible bachelor persona while on the road. Studio orders."

Andy snorted. "Yeah, *okay*," he said, mockingly. "That went out the window a *long* time ago, baby. It lasted about two weeks before you were making out with me in front of the paparazzi."

Doni tossed him a snarky grin. "I didn't hear you complaining."

Andy leaned in for a kiss. "And you never will."

During the reception, Andy couldn't help but notice that Cynthia was avoiding the champagne on her table. As she and Darren took to the floor for their first dance, he noticed a distinct curve to her belly and understood. He suspected they would have another announcement to make soon – but decided to let her take her time in telling him the news.

"Alright, kid – you know that I love ya, but here's the deal. The studio is making some changes and that means I've got to shift my focus elsewhere for the time being." Reid led Andy through the studio. "I'm not abandoning you, so don't panic or anything – but I am going to be putting you in the hands of someone I trust for the time being."

He crossed a large lot where a young woman stood, waiting by a camera. She was the epitome of cool, and Andy was, once again, reminded that he still wasn't used to being around this kind of crowd. She wore a tight knit dress with fishnets and combat boots – her wild, curly red hair sticking out from under a beret. She wore sunglasses, inside, just as Reid did and her dark lipstick made her brilliant white teeth pop as she grinned at them.

"Andy, meet Bebe," Reid introduced her. "She's been here just about as long as I have – grew up in the industry with me. And she's a fuckin' firecracker. She'll be overseeing your second album and coordinating your next tour. Anything you need, she'll get for you. Bebe, this is -"

"Andy McLayne!" she finished for him, sticking her hand out to greet him. "Big fan. You are making your way through the charts right now, my friend."

Andy shook Bebe's hand politely. He didn't know what else to say to her. She was kind of intimidating.

"Bebe will take good care of you," Reid promised. "But if she gives you shit and you need to go over her head – you've got my number. You give me a call, okay?" He winked in Bebe's direction. "I don't want to see you throwing this all away because I'm not keepin' you in line anymore, you got it?"

Andy smiled. "Thanks, Reid."

"Alright, I'll leave you two to get acquainted," Reid said. He leaned in, kissing Bebe on the cheek. "You be good to him, alright? He's my favorite. Don't tell my other clients."

"Secret's safe with me," Bebe said, grinning. "Alright, Mr. McLayne – over here."

Bebe directed Andy to stand on a marker in front of the camera. "We've got you slated to do some real quick promo bytes ahead of the next album. It should be mostly painless. I'll just need you to stand on this."

"Sounds good," Andy said, stepping where she told him to. He still didn't feel comfortable in front of a camera, but it was getting a little easier every time. He wished Doni was there.

Bebe stepped behind the camera, flipping a few switches. "Perfect," she said. "Please state your name for the camera!"

Andy laughed nervously. "Uh – h-hi. I'm Andy McLayne."

Bebe stared at him. “Please tell me this isn’t your first interview…”

“No,” Andy turned red. “I’m just…awkward.”

“Relax,” she said. “We’re just talking. Let’s try that again. State your name for the camera.”

“Hi,” Andy said, a little more confidently. “My name is Andy McLayne.”

“Andy, what do you do for a living?”

“I’m uh – I’m a musician.”

Bebe almost turned the camera off, slapping a hand to her face. “Holy bejeezus, kid. A musician?! You have three songs topping the charts right now. I would say you’re a little more than *just* a musician.”

Andy couldn’t help but smile. “Okay, okay, *fine.* I’m a rock star. *I guess.*”

“Hell yeah, you are!” Bebe agreed, thankful Andy was finally relaxing. “Own your achievements, friend. Now, tell me what it’s like to be a queer icon.”

“I don’t know if I would call myself an *icon…*”

“Power through it, big guy.”

Andy rubbed the back of his neck. He was still adjusting to anyone caring about who he was at all, let alone what his sexuality was. But he also knew it was important for those who didn’t have the privilege of this kind of platform to see people like them succeeding.

“It’s nice,” he settled on. “To feel like I don’t have to hide who I am. I wish I had more people in the media who were like me growing up. I don’t think I’m any kind of role model or anything – I’m just a guy with a guitar – but if someone out there feels more seen – more validated – because of me or my music and what I do – then, I suppose it’s all worth it in the end.”

Bebe grinned. “See,” she said. “You’re getting the hang of this. Alright, now – tell me about someone who inspires you. Someone who changed your life.”

Andy knew she was hoping for some pop star who paved the way – or for him to say *The Beatles* or something – but his mind immediately turned to Doni.

“Alright, I’ll bite,” he said with a small smile. “That would be my partner – Adonis. Doni. I don’t know where I would be without him. Not here – that’s for sure.”

“I heard he might be featured on one of your upcoming songs, is that true?” Bebe prompted.

This was true. He’d convinced Doni to sing with him on a song he’d written about their relationship. Doni hadn’t stepped into the booth with him yet, but he knew – when it happened – it would end up being Andy’s favorite song.

“I can’t wait to make music with him,” Andy said, his cheeks turning red. “My two greatest loves coming together – how could I not be excited for it? I think it’ll be really special.”

“I think so, too,” Bebe agreed, flashing a genuine smile. “Is there anything else exciting for you on the horizon?”

Andy paused, and just smiled in return, looking directly into the camera.

Arena shows were still unreal – Andy could barely see beyond the lights but knowing that thousands of people turned out for his shows blew his mind. When the songs ended and there was an uproar – he waved and blew kisses at faces he didn’t recognize, pacing the stage as he set up the next one. He sometimes bantered with the band, cracking jokes and working the crowd. Andy on stage had far more confidence than Andy in his everyday life. It was wild to watch – and Doni did – every single show from the side of the stage.

“Before we start the next song,” Andy pulled the mic from its stand and walked toward the audience. “Do you guys mind if I introduce you to someone really quick?”

The crowd cheered its approval, and Andy turned his attention to Doni.

“Doni, baby, can you come out here for a sec?”

Doni stared at him, wide-eyed. He never joined Andy on stage. Bebe nudged his shoulder, encouraging him to go. He stepped out hesitantly to another raucous roar of applause.

Andy returned the mic, pulling Doni in for a kiss, which sent the women, especially, screaming for more. Doni blushed and waved nervously as Andy took his hand.

"Can we bring the lights up a little bit, Frank?" Andy said into the microphone. As the lights lifted, he nodded. "Thank you. Everyone, if you don't know already, this is my partner – Doni. He has been my rock over the last few years, navigating all this chaos. Can we get a little more noise for Doni, please?"

They were happy to oblige. Doni started to sweat. The lights were so bright and there were so many people staring at them. He gripped Andy's hand tighter.

"There we go," Andy said, satisfied. He glanced at Doni, noticing the anxiety written all over his boyfriend's face. "He's lookin' at me like I'm crazy. *I'm so sorry, babe."* He turned back to the audience. "Doni has no idea why I'm doing this, and he's probably going to kill me for it later, but uh – you guys don't know this – but we actually met when I was just playing to an audience of two drunk college students. He believed in me – supported me – even uprooted his entire life to follow me on the road."

Andy broke off, emotionally, the reality of what he was doing catching up with him. His hand trembled in Doni's as he turned to look at him. Doni's heart started to race.

"He is my best friend, my biggest fan," Andy continued, his voice cracking slightly. "And the love of my life." He dropped his voice so only Doni could hear him. "I love you."

Doni teared up, now holding Andy's hand with both of his own. He had an inkling – but he didn't want to be wrong.

"I love you, too," he whispered, too afraid to look at anything but Andy's beautiful green eyes. "B-Baby, what are you doing?"

Andy caressed Doni's cheek and kissed him softly. "I think you know," he said, still only for them to hear. "I'm making good on a promise."

The tears fell immediately, and Doni drew a deep breath. He was so in love with the man standing in front of him. He wanted to yell his answer before the question was even asked, but he didn't want to ruin this most perfect moment.

"Are you ready for our next adventure?" Andy asked quietly, pulling Doni close.

Doni nodded. "Yes," he breathed.

Andy knelt down on one knee.

And the crowd went wild.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Britney Mitchell is a millennial, queer identifying, indie author and creative from Maine who has been writing since the age of five. When she's not doing that, she can be found preaching body positivity, baking elaborate cupcakes, snuggling with her cats, or streaming on Twitch! She has been called 'the right kind of extra' and aims to live up to that!